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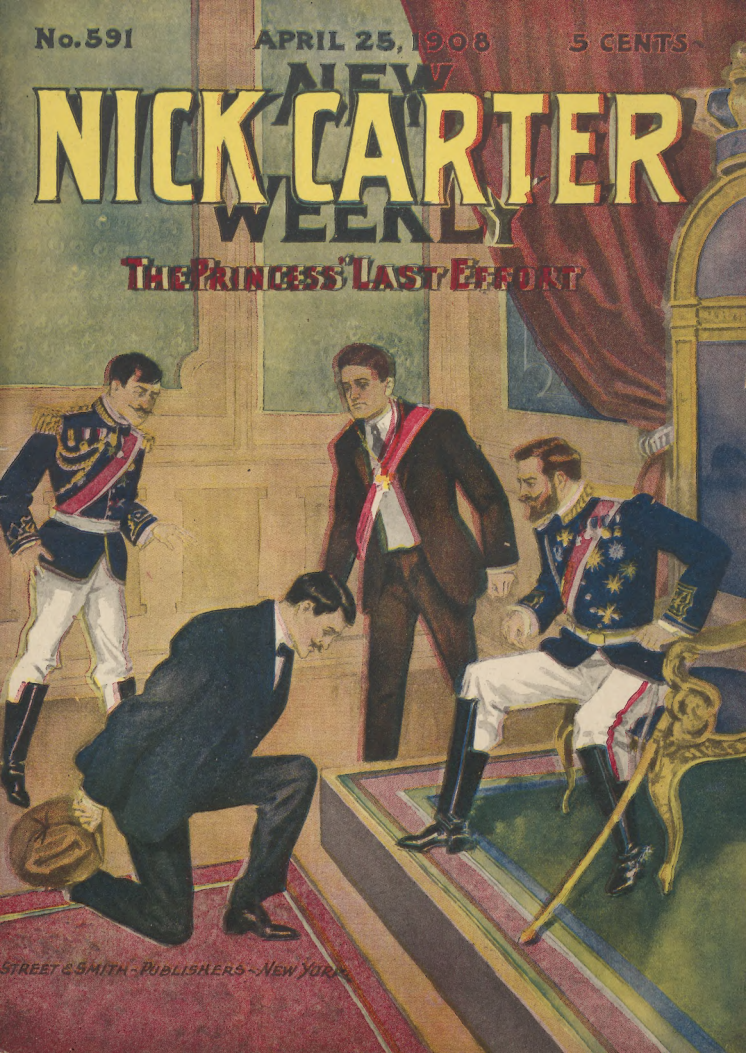
NEW NICK CARTER WEEKLY

THE PRINCESS' LAST EFFORT



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NEW NICK CARTER WEEKLY

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The Princess' Last Effort

OR,

NICK CARTER WIELDS A ROYAL SCEPTER.

Edited by CHICKERING CARTER.

CHAPTER I.

THE FLIGHT OF PRINCESS DEEHRA.

"Nicholas!"

The detective started wide-awake instantly, for in addition to the sound of his name, a hand fell lightly upon his shoulders, and he sat up in bed to discover that His Royal Highness, Prince Rupert, was standing beside him.

"Hello, Rupert!" exclaimed Nick. "What is the trouble now?"

"She has gone again, Nicholas."

"She has gone? Who has gone?"

"The princess, man! Who else but Deehra would have the hardihood, the daring, the courage, in the face of all that has happened, to defy the king, the court—and all precedent as well, do you suppose?"

"Humph!" muttered the detective in some disgust, as he slipped out of bed and began to draw on his clothing. "I suppose it is time to get up, anyhow, isn't it?"

"High time; yes, indeed."

"When I went to bed I felt as if I hadn't had any sleep for a month. What is the hour, Rupert?"

"Nearly eight o'clock."

"Oh, well, that isn't so bad. Seventy-two hours without any sleep at all, and then only a little more than ten of them. Is it true, what you just said, that Deehra has gone again, or were you only trying to see if you could startle me?"

"It is only too true."

The detective smiled.

"She reminds me," he said, "of a boy I used to know at home. It was when I was a kid myself. That boy used to run away from home every chance he got, and once in a burst of confidence with me, when he was trying to induce me to try it with him, he confessed that he only did it for the fun of being caught. He called it playing hide-and-seek on a large scale. He didn't really want to run away from home at all, and he always wanted to be captured; but he did enjoy the excitement of the chase. Deehra seems to have caught the runaway microbe somewhere, and somehow—and she's got it bad. When did you discover the fact?"

"Ten minutes ago."

"How did you discover it?"

"This letter was brought to me," and he held up a letter that he had brought into the room with him. "Shall I read it to you?"

"Presently. Who brought the letter to you?"

"One of the Countess Zita's maids. Not Annette; one of the others."

"Oho! So Zita is mixed up in it again, is she?"

"Zita has gone with the princess this time."

"*What?* You don't mean it, do you?"

"I certainly do."

"My dear prince, this is getting interesting. If the princess has induced Zita to accompany her—well, it puts a different complexion on the matter altogether."

"How so, Nick?"

"Well, I have seen enough of the beautiful young countess to know that she would not undertake that sort of thing unless with pretty good assurance in her own mind of success. I mean that I don't think that Zita would have been induced to brave the anger of the king unless she felt confident that she could succeed in what she undertook. We won't find it an easy matter to overtake the princess if she is acting under the guidance of the Countess Zita von Shellwitz. Who wrote the letter? The princess or the countess?"

"The princess. Dechra wrote it herself."

"You may read it to me now, if you will."

"Listen, then. 'My Dear Uncle Rupert'—she always addresses me in that manner when it is her wish to be particularly affectionate, and when she is particularly in earnest."

"All right. Go on, please."

"'I am leaving this letter with one of Zita's maids to be delivered to you as late in the day as possible'—fortunately, Nick, the maid delivered it to me just as early as possible."

"Well, never mind all that. Cut out the comments and let me have the rest of the letter consecutively."

"'When you read what I have written here,'" the prince continued, "'I will have again taken my departure without permission from the palace. You will be surprised, amazed, shocked, and pained, I know, and I regret more than I can tell you the necessity for causing you pain; but the necessity does exist. I am sending you this letter in order that you may know positively this time that I go away of my own will and for my own pleasure and happiness; and in the fact that Zita has consented to go with me, you can read much that it will not be necessary for me to write.

"'The interview that I had with His Majesty, my father, after my return from Castle Linmark, yesterday, was highly unsatisfactory to both of us—particularly so to me.

"'At first I was overjoyed to be back again. I believed that after all that had happened the king would put his arms around me as a father should, and would tell me that at least he would not force me to wed with any man, prince or otherwise, to whom I personally objected, even though he would not give his consent to my betrothal to the man of my choice. I did not expect that, and I was prepared to suffer in silence, and to remain here.

"'But although my father took me in his arms, although he had tears of joy in his eyes when he received me back again, although during the first few moments of our reunion he was all a father and not a bit a king, the kingship returned presently, and it was not long before he harked back to the old and hateful subject, that he hoped now I would be amenable to reason, and would consent to bestow my hand where he bade me do it.

"'I saw at once that it was no use. I realized that I must have the same fight over again, and that there was even more suffering for me in the future than there had been in the past.

"'But more than that, dear Uncle Rupert. I had not talked a very long time with his majesty ere he told me in so many words that if I defied him again he would have me shut up in Castle Zollern for a year, and that if I did not at the end of the year consent to obey him, I should remain there for the rest of my life.

"'I confess that I was frightened. You know what Castle Zollern is, better than I do. Just a hunting-seat that the kings of our country have used for many generations—a place that is so old that history has forgotten when it was built, and that is so lost in the wilderness of mountains and forests that surround it that its very loneliness would possibly make a madwoman of me before the first year could pass over my head.

"'I conducted myself as best I could while in the presence of his majesty, but the first instant it was possible, I fled from him back to my own apartments—and then I sought Zita.

"'I was determined already to escape again, and when Zita heard my story of what the king had said to me, she gave me her sympathy, and consented to fly with me. That is the whole story—or at least all that need be told. When you read this, we will have gone.

"'I leave no message for my father, save what you choose to tell him. I am leaving a letter for my mother, the queen, but it is only a message of love; nothing more. To you, my dear uncle, I also leave my love and my gratitude for your many kindnesses; to Mr. Carter, I leave the assurances of my respect and esteem, and the one request: that he will refuse, for the sake of my happiness, to take up the chase after me again. DEEHRA.'"

The prince folded the letter and placed it in one of his pockets.

"What do you think of it?" he asked.

"I regard it as rather a remarkable document," replied the detective. "Frankly, I would not have believed that the king could be so unkind to her."

"His majesty did not intend it as unkindness; he merely sought to exert his authority over her, and to compel her to his will."

"More fool he, then!"

"Hush, Nicholas!"

"Why should I hush? I would not hesitate to tell the king himself that same thing, if he should ask for my opinion."

"He might resent it."

"Much I care whether he resented it or not, Rupert. He should know his own daughter better than to suppose he could drive her to the performance of his will by the use of threats."

"I expect he did not really mean them."

"Oh, yes, he did. And anyhow, he made her think he meant them. And Castle Zollern! I would not send a laughing jackass there lest it should die of melancholia. And its history is enough to make it a lasting horror to every member of your family, prince. How many princesses died there, mad, during the last three hundred years, because some one of your ancestors could not force that precious family will upon them? I shall respect the wishes of the princess, Rupert."

"What do you mean?"

"I refer to the closing sentence of her communication to you."

"You will not help us find her again? Do you mean that?"

"I mean that I will not search for her in order that she may be confined even for a day in Castle Zollern, or in any other place; not if all the kings and princes in Europe asked me to do it. No, sir!"

"I cannot blame you for assuming that position, Nicholas."

"Has the king been told yet of her flight?"

"No. I have told nobody. I came directly to you. Do you know what I think, Nicholas?"

"I haven't the slightest idea, prince. What is it?"

"I believe that when Deehra returned to the palace, she found some message from the man she loves; from the American, from Major Richard Hartwell, and——"

"Well, I do not, if you do. I don't believe any such thing. I happen to know, because Zita told me, that it was agreed between the princess and Hartwell that they should not communicate with each other, even to the extent of sending messages, for two years. Less than a year and a half has passed since they parted, and the princess would not go back on her promise to herself. No, Rupert, she has merely fled from the threatened cruelty of her own father. She is a high-spirited girl, so human in her affections that she should never have been born a princess—or at least she should have had a father who could forget his crown in his love for such a daughter. She says in that letter that she was quite willing to give Hartwell up forever, and she meant it. Why didn't the king meet her half-way, and give her a chance to be to him what she wants to be. Oh, you kings and princes! You make me tired! You are only men, after all, and your children are only boys and girls; but you think you are little tin gods set up on pedestals for all creation to worship. Tell you what, Prince Rupert, this day sees me start for New York, bag and baggage, for I'm sick of royalty and everything that goes with it. This tirade doesn't refer to you, of course, Rupert, for I think you hate being a prince about as much as I'd hate to be one."

CHAPTER II.

THE COUNTESS ZITA'S LETTERS.

They were interrupted at that moment by the entrance of the attendant who waited upon the detective during his sojourn at the palace, and he brought a sealed envelope on a silver salver, and, having delivered it, departed without a word.

"I expect that here we have something more on the same subject," said the detective, as he glanced at the envelope. "I observe that this bears the crest of Countess Zita."

He broke the seal and glanced for a moment through the contents of the letter; then, without preface, he read aloud:

"'My Dear Mr. Carter: Doubtless you will have learned, by the time this is given into your hands, that Princess Deehra and I have gone away. That statement has rather a mild sound, I find, as I read it over again, but it is nevertheless literally the truth. We are going away. His majesty, the king, threatened Deehra with Castle Zollern, and whether he really meant it or not—and it is doubtful if he did—the mere suggestion of it was sufficient to frighten Deehra into doing what we have now decided to do. And it was enough, also, to convince me that it is my duty to go with her this time.

"'I shall cling to her now, no matter what happens, whether it be for good or ill. She needs me and I will not fail her. If she is recaptured and punished, I will take my punishment with her, for well I know that the king will not forgive me, once I have taken the step.

"'This letter is merely to bid you adieu, Mr. Carter; to thank you for your courtesies and kindnesses to me; to assure you of my earnest regard for you—if indeed you need any assurances on that point.

"'It is also for another purpose, and that is to beg that you will not suffer yourself to be induced to seek us.

"'We know that as soon as the king is informed of our flight, he will send for you, and he will expect that you will at once take up the search for us to bring us

back again to the palace, this time no doubt as prisoners; we feel that even his royal highness, Prince Rupert, will endeavor to induce you to search for us, although we are both convinced of his personal sympathy, and of his kindness and affection. Still, he is a prince, and princes are conventional.

"'But don't do it, Mr. Carter. That is a prayer to you in which the princess and I both join. We ask it of you, and of your American love for fair play—and you know that Deehra has not had half a chance for the enjoyment of such a thing. ZITA.'"

Prince Rupert laughed uneasily when the reading of the letter was finished.

"They are playing a strong hand," he said. "They have both appealed directly to you."

"Yes, prince; and they both understand how to make the appeal, too."

"It would seem so."

"I think I will adhere to the resolution just formed."

"What was that?"

"To return home. I'll get myself out of this business once and for all time."

"And leave us, Nicholas, with all this trouble on our hands?"

"Confound it, hasn't the king brought it upon himself? What right had he, even though he is a king, to threaten his daughter with such a place as Zollern? I haven't a bit of sympathy for him; not a bit."

"And yet only last night you were saying to me what a fine fellow he could be if he unbent."

"I know it. The king has the faculty of making you hate him one moment and love him the next better than any man I ever knew."

"He has presented you with the Order of the Golden Eagle, which only members of royal families are supposed to receive, and he has——"

"Wait a moment, Rupert. What are you trying to argue, just now?"

"That you should not desert us in our trouble. Deehra has gone from the palace, and Deehra must return to the palace. Don't you realize that?"

"I understand how you must feel about it. I understand how the entire household will feel about it, of course. It is a disgrace, if it should become known, which would excite every court in Europe, and give rise to no end of talk. I know all that."

"Well, then——"

"Well, then, I reassert that the king has no one to blame but himself. I reassert that he drove Deehra away himself."

"You will at least consent to discuss this matter with his majesty, won't you?"

"I don't see how I can very well escape doing that, although I assure you that if it could be avoided I would take the chance."

"I shall go to the king now, with this letter of Deehra's. Will you wait here in your rooms for me?"

"Yes. I haven't had my breakfast yet."

"Will you let me take Countess Zita's letter with me, to show him also?"

"Certainly. Here it is. And, Rupert, you may tell him that I have decided to respect the wishes of the princess and the countess. If he chooses to be angry because I have done so, well and good. That is his privilege."

"You will discuss the matter with him?"

"Certainly. Why not? But you may as well inform him that if he wishes to discuss it with me he will have to make up his mind to listen to some plain speaking."

"Plain speaking? What and how do you mean?"

"I mean that if he wants my opinion, he will get it straight from the shoulder, and in words that are just as plain and direct as I would utter to the humblest father on earth. Make him understand that he need not send for me unless he is prepared for that sort of thing."

"You are angry now, Nicholas."

"Angry? No, I'm not; not at all. I'm disgusted. Just plain disgusted."

The prince shrugged his shoulders; then he smiled; then he crossed the room and slapped the detective heartily on the shoulder, while he exclaimed:

"By Jove, Nick, if we princes and kings could have some one around us all the time who would speak their minds occasionally, it would do us lots of good. But we are like hothouse plants——"

"Hothouse plants? Oh, no, you're not. You are all like *ice*-house plants—all save you, Rupert."

Laughing, the prince left the room, and had no sooner gone than the attendant who delivered the first letter to the detective reentered the room with a second one.

"Well?" said Nick, when he saw that the man wished to speak to him.

"Pardon me, sir, but the maid of the Countess von Strellwitz—she who is called Annette—gave these two letters into my hands in person; and she informed me that it was the wish of the countess that this one should not be delivered until you were alone. I hope I have done right in carrying out the wishes of the countess, sir."

"You have; entirely so. Thank you."

The detective waited until he was alone to break the seal; and then he read:

"DEAR MR. CARTER: Will you forgive two letters from me this morning? The princess knew about the other one, but I am writing this one of my own volition, and without her knowledge, for I wish to say things in it of which she might not approve.

"You know as well as I know, Mr. Carter, how utterly impossible it is that Princess Deehra and the man she loves should ever wed without the full consent and approval of his majesty, the king. The time was when Deehra believed that by losing herself utterly, and concealing her identity for three years at least, the search for her would pass and she would be forgotten. But that time, if it ever existed, is past. Even if it could have been accomplished at the time she first sought to escape from the court,* it is impossible now. I believe it was always impossible.

"But it seems to me that there is a way in which the princess can ultimately be made happy; a way in which she and the man she loves may be brought together; a way in which they may wed with the full consent of the king—but that way, if it exists, lies through you alone.

"I have asked you in that other letter please not to search for us; I repeat that request here, feeling that I can depend upon you to grant it. I know that your impulse will be to abandon the whole thing at once, to return to your own country and leave us to work out our destinies by ourselves, but again I want to beg you not to do that.

"Mr. Carter, I have never known a man to wield so much influence over the king as you have exerted since you have been here, and it occurs to me now that you might, if you choose, make use of it in the interest of all concerned, in a way that has perhaps not yet occurred to you, and that might not at all, if it were not suggested.

"In a word, it is this: Major Richard Hartwell, whom you have said you know personally, although it is long since you have seen him, is descended from a younger branch of one of the oldest and noblest families in this kingdom. He has already resigned from the United States army, in order to prepare himself for the marriage with the princess, which those two had foolishly supposed might some time take place after Deehra had succeeded in losing her identity. As if she ever could!

"Mr. Carter, it would only take the scratch of a pen in the hand of his majesty the king to restore Major Hartwell personally to the standing at court in this realm that his family once enjoyed. The king can make of Richard Hartwell what he pleases, and if the king is disposed to have his daughter near him, if he is disposed to end all this unhappiness in the right way, and as a father should end it, I think that perhaps he could be induced to make those pen-scratches, and to make it possible for him to bestow his daughter on the man she loves.

"If there is any person in the world who can bring this about, that person is yourself. I make the suggestion. I leave the rest of it entirely to you, and to your own good judgment as to whether it is feasible or not.

*See NICK CARTER WEEKLY No. 590.

"For ourselves, I will add this to my other letter:

"I do not think that even you can find us where we are going to hide, and yet I pray that you will not make the effort unless with some reason such as I have outlined.

"But there will be no way of communicating with us. I dare not handicap your own efforts in behalf of the princess by giving you any knowledge which might be a detriment to you.

"Where we are going, I believe that even the great Nick Carter of New York cannot find us without great and continued effort; and so I say to you that one year from now—not before that time, but one year hence, I will come out of the retreat we have chosen long enough to obtain a letter from you which may at that time be sent in care of our embassy, in London.

"We are taking my maid Annette with us. I may send her for your letter, at the end of a year, for she is very dependable, as you know.

"And now, Heaven bless you, Mr. Carter. You know of my regard for you. Sometimes I am tempted to wish it were less; sometimes I am tempted to wish it were more, and that your own for me were even greater than it is. But fate has made us who live under the sway of scepters mere pawns in the game of life, to be moved about at will by the hands that control. ZITA."

Nick Carter read the letter aloud to himself twice; then he crossed over to the glowing grate and laid it upon the fire, watching it until it was consumed, and even then stirring the carbonized ashes into a mass of nothing among the coals.

He was very thoughtful after that; thoughtful while he consumed the breakfast that was presently brought to him—thoughtful, indeed, until the return of Prince Rupert.

CHAPTER III.

AN INTERVIEW WITH THE KING.

"I have told the king," said the prince, as he dropped upon a chair wearily. "I hope I won't soon have to go through a like scene again."

"Took it hard, did he?"

"He lost his temper—as he sometimes does. He wishes to see you at once. He will not transact any business until he has done so."

"Is his majesty still in the excess of his temper, Rupert?"

"No; he has controlled himself by this time."

"Did you tell him what I asked you to?"

"About your intention to return home? Yes. I told him."

"And also that if he talked with me I should speak plainly?"

"I reminded him that it was your habit to do so, and that you had intimated to me that if you were compelled to discuss the subject, you would speak what was on your mind."

"Very well. I will go to him at once."

"Shall I go with you?"

"Yes, Rupert. Go there with me, and then, if you can do so, leave me alone with his majesty. It will be better so."

"I quite agree with you."

The king was in his private cabinet, pacing up and down the room like an animal that is caged; and he greeted Nick with a weary smile, while he motioned him toward a chair.

"Be seated, Mr. Carter," he said. "Rupert has intimated that you would like this interview to be without ceremony, and I will say that I, also, prefer it so. Rupert, will you leave Mr. Carter with me, please?"

He waited, then, several moments before he spoke again, and Nick could see that he was endeavoring with all his strength to control his inclination to storm; but at last he turned toward the detective with a smile.

"Mr. Carter," he said, "this is a very unhappy event for me this morning."

"Yes, your majesty, it is."

"You may use the personal pronoun in addressing me this morning if you will."

"Thank you, sir."

"I have driven Deehra away from me again."

"Yes."

"And my brother has informed me that you are inclined to respect her wishes, and those of the countess, who accompanied her in her flight, in regard to assisting in the search for her and any effort to bring her back here to the palace."

"I am more than inclined in that respect, sir; I am determined. I will say to you frankly that had the princess asked my advice, after her interview with you, to which she refers in her letter, I should have assisted her in her escape from you."

"That is strong language, Mr. Carter."

"I asked Prince Rupert to inform your majesty that nothing else could be expected of me this morning. I would have preferred to return to my home without seeing you again."

"And yet only yesterday you were my friend, and professed more or less affection for me," said the king, with a sad smile, while at the same time he dropped upon a chair facing the detective.

"I am so still, sir. And I do feel a very great regard for you; but I consider, none the less, that you have committed a grievous wrong against your daughter, in threatening her with a place so terrible in its environment as Zollern, and, in a word, in driving her forth into the world again when her place is here with you."

"Suppose I admit that you are entirely correct, Mr. Carter?"

"You do not need to admit it. I know that I am."

The king bit his lip.

"That was a remark that sounded like condescension," he said lamely.

"Yes."

"I want my daughter back, Mr. Carter."

"I doubt very much if you can get her back, sir."

"On any terms."

"That is a broad statement for the king to make."

"Nevertheless, I mean it."

"'Any terms' would imply your consent to her marriage with the man she loves, sir."

"Oh, well, of course, you know that to be impossible. Even if I were personally to consent to it, every court of Europe would be scandalized if a princess of a royal house like mine were to marry—well, were to marry a man of no rank at all."

"I understand you. But there is a way over all difficulties, if one chooses to search for them."

"I don't think I comprehend you now, Mr. Carter."

"Shall I make myself plainly understood?"

"If you please."

"Let us suppose a case, then. If Mr. Richard Hartwell, once a major in the army of my country, were suddenly to become a man of rank—no, I will put it in another form—if he were now a man of high rank in your own country, could you be induced to consent to his marriage with your daughter?"

"Why ask such a question, since it is so impossible a situation?"

"Nevertheless, I would like an answer."

"If the rank were high enough to still the tongues of diplomacy, and the gossip of other courts of Europe, I might; yes. I have realized this morning that she will never consent to marry into any one of the royal houses of Europe."

"You say, 'if the rank were high enough.' I ask you, how high?"

"I do not know how to answer you. There are families in the kingdom as noble as my own, yet whose titles are no greater than that of Count."

"As, for instance, Count Herbert von Linmark?"*

"Yes."

"Prince Rupert told me once that long ago Count Herbert aspired to the hand of Princess Deehra. It is true, I suppose?"

"Yes."

"He was refused at that time because you looked to Deehra to ally your house with some other royal family of Europe. Is that correct?"

*See No. 590 of the NICK CARTER WEEKLY.

"It is."

"As the situation exists to-day, if it were Count Herbert whom she loved, would you consent to her union with him? And would such a marriage be sufficiently noble to still the tongues of idlers around the royal courts?"

"Yes."

"Do you mean yes to both questions?"

"I do."

"Your majesty had some personal acquaintance with Major Richard Hartwell when he was assigned to your court as military attaché to the American embassy?"

"Yes."

"You found no personal fault with him?"

"None whatever. On the contrary, I quite liked him. He was frequently at the palace; much too frequently it would now appear," he added, with a weary smile.

"Did your majesty ever take the trouble to inquire into the antecedents of Richard Hartwell?"

"Certainly not. Why should I have done so?"

"You know now that Hartwell is the man she loves, do you not?"

"Yes. Rupert has informed me."

"Has the prince told you the entire story?"

"No; merely the fact I have just mentioned."

"Then you in reality know nothing of the princess' intentions when she first fled from the palace, nearly four months ago?"**

"No."

"I will tell you in as few words as possible."

"If you please. I would like to know about it."

"When you, as king rather than as her father, ordered her to accept the hand of a certain young king who sought it, and she refused, she was already under promise of marriage to young Hartwell, and this is how they had resolved to bring about that apparently impossible climax to their love. It began a year before that time, mind you."

"Yes."

"There was an interview between them in which it was agreed that Hartwell should resign his post and also from the army, and was to go away utterly out of her sight and presence. He was to be absent a year before she made a move, and then it was planned that she should run away from the palace—just as she did do—and go into hiding. She was, however, to remain in this city, in the care of an Englishwoman who was engaged for the purpose of shielding the princess. They were to reside here, within a stone's throw of the palace, for six months, after which time they were to go to London and live there another six months, in more or less seclusion, those two women. All this time Hartwell was not even to communicate or send a message of any sort to the princess; nor she to him.

"At the expiration of two years, if all went well, they would see each other, but one more year still was to elapse before the marriage. It was thought between them that by that time the search for her would have blown over, and that she would have been dropped by her own royal family; by yourself, in other words. That was the plan."

"It was a very foolish plan all through, Mr. Carter."

"Certainly it was; but those two people were in love. Deehra merely wished to lose her identity as a royal princess, and she believed that she could do so."

"And now, at the present moment, provided the princess can pass the borders, do you suppose that she has gone to him? To this Hartwell?"

"Not for one instant do I suppose any such thing."

"Well, sir, to what does all this that you are talking about lead? You began by asking me if I would consent to the marriage of Deehra with this Hartwell, if, perchance, he were of one of our great families—such as the Linmarks, for instance."

"Yes. I did. Would you, sir?"

"I have already answered that question. That it is absurd, since the man is only an—pardon me, I was going to say only an American, but what I meant was that he has no rank."

"But if it were Count Herbert von Linmark, you would consent?"

"Yes; in order to still this business forever. If she will marry Count Herbert——"

"Pardon me, sir. Deehra will not marry Count Herbert, any more than she would accept one of the princelings you selected for her. But there is another view of the case that is worthy of your consideration."

"What is that?"

"Richard Hartwell is a descendant of one of the oldest and greatest families of your own kingdom; a family that is now extinct save for the branch of it that he represents. His great-grandfather was a younger brother of a former chancellor of the kingdom, Count von Hartzwold. You did not know that, but it has occurred to me that it would be an easy matter for your majesty to receive this young member of that great family into your kingdom, and to bestow upon him the title that could very properly be given him; and it seems to me that it would be a very pleasant method out of all the present difficulties."

CHAPTER IV.

NICK CARTER'S GREAT PLEA.

The king leaned forward in his chair suddenly and fixed his eyes upon the face of Nick Carter.

"Are you mad? Are you quite mad?" he demanded presently.

**See No. 589 of the NICK CARTER WEEKLY.

"No; not quite. In fact, I am perfectly sane. It could be done, could it not? The king has power to do such a thing, has he not?"

The king sank back into his chair again without replying, and for a long time he remained in that position, silent, and apparently thinking deeply over what had been said to him.

At last he asked:

"Do you know this to be true, Mr. Carter? Are there sufficient proofs of the statements you have just made to me?"

"Amply sufficient. Yes, your majesty."

"Then the great-grandfather of this Major Richard Hartwell must have been Count Ludwig von Hartzwold. I know something of the history of that family."

"I believe that was his great-grandfather's name."

"Who left this country to go to America, in 1765."

"I am not familiar with the dates. I only know the general history of the American family as it was related to me once, long ago, by Richard himself."

"Then you have a personal acquaintance with this young man?"

"I had once. I have not seen him for several years."

"You have not communicated with him since you have been in Breslin?"

"Certainly not."

"He does not know of your presence here?"

"Not to my knowledge, sir."

"He certainly could have no inkling of the suggestion you have just made to me."

"He certainly could not have any such idea, sir."

"Do you know him to be a worthy young man?"

"As worthy as any man in your realm, your majesty. More than that, his father was a distinguished officer of the American Army, and his grandfather—the son of old Count Ludwig—was an aide on the staff of General Washington."

"And the women of the family, for the several generations? What of them?"

"I know nothing about it, sir, save that they came from the best of our Southern families."

The king was silent for a long time after that, but presently he murmured, more to himself than to the detective:

"I fear it would be impossible. There would be too great opposition among the nobles."

"Why, sir?" asked Nick.

The king started.

"I was thinking aloud," he said.

"But you were debating in your mind if this thing could not be done, were you not?"

"Yes."

"And you fancied that you found an objection?"

"If it were only fancy!"

"You referred to the nobles. May I ask, was not the family of Hartzwold as great as any in this kingdom?"

"Greater; greater than any, save royalty itself."

"Greater than the Linmarks?"

"Yes. In one way. Perhaps you might place them on an even plane."

"And the family, so far as this kingdom is concerned, is now extinct?"

"Yes. The title is in abeyance. It is not lost. I have the power to restore it to some distant relative if I see fit; and I may as well say right here that there are claimants for it."

"Claimants with as good a claim as young Richard would have?"

"With much better claims, judged from our standpoints."

"But there are no Hartzwolds, sir?"

"No; only collateral branches of the family."

"Now, that brings me back again to my original question, which I have not asked. What nobles would object to such action on your part?"

"Every one of them from the top down, for a Count von Hartzwold would take precedence over all of them; even over the Linmarks."

"Isn't it quite proper that it should be so—that a Count von Hartzwold should take precedence—since *this* Count von Hartzwold would be closely allied to the royal family itself?"

"By Heaven, sir, you go too fast!"

"The faster we drive the more quickly we will arrive. What nobles would raise the most strenuous objection to such an act of justice as the restoration of the title to the only Von Hartzwold alive?"

"Ah! Don't ask me. There would be a storm—particularly when it became known that I elected to bestow the hand of Dechra upon him."

The detective smiled. He realized that he had won his fight, and that now it only remained to arrange the details. In his heart he thanked Zita for having given him the idea, for now he saw a way out of all the maze.

"These collateral relatives would object, of course," he said.

"Naturally. It would mean more to them than the mere restoration of the title. Some of them bear other titles now."

"What more would it mean, sir?"

"There are the estates."

"What of them?"

"They are at present held by the crown. They are vast estates, too. No man in the realm would be richer than Count von Hartzwold, unless one or two of our bankers, and at least one of our great manufacturers."

"The crown has not confiscated the estates? The crown does not make use of the income from those estates?"

"No."

"Then it seems to me, your majesty, that the way is made perfectly clear for you. You have the power, as I understand you, with the approval of your ministers, to restore those estates to a rightful claimant, if one should be found to exist?"

"Yes; that is unquestionable. To a rightful claimant."

"Very well; here you have one—and the only one who lives who is a rightful claimant."

"I don't know but you are right, Mr. Carter."

"And more. In bestowing the title and the estates that go with it upon this young man who is to marry the Princess Deehra, you——"

"Don't go too fast, Mr. Carter."

"Permit me to finish. In bestowing the title and the estates upon this young man, you at once provide him with a competency sufficient to maintain the princess in the style and after the manner that befits her rank, and you do not have to ask your council of nobles, or your house of affairs, for a pension for him. He does not become a charge upon the taxpayers of the kingdom. In fact, he relieves them of one expense. Do you follow me, sir?"

"I do. You are a great pleader, Mr. Carter. If you will come and live with us for the rest of your life, I will make you chancellor of the kingdom."

"Thank you, sir," laughed the detective, "but I think I am hardly fitted for that. But I will prophesy that not many years will elapse before your Count von Hartzwold will fill the office of his great ancestor. He has the ability to become a chancellor."

"You half-persuade me, Mr. Carter. I must consider it."

"Tell me, if you please, the name of one noble who would make the greatest objection to this matter we are discussing."

"You have mentioned it already several times."

"Count Herbert von Linmark?"

"Yes."

"I will engage, your majesty, to secure not only the approval, but the active assistance of Count Herbert in bringing the other nobles to terms."

"*You* will?"

"Yes. I."

"How will you do that? I thought he hated you?"

"He has altered his opinion of me lately."*

"If that could be done."

"I will engage to accomplish it, your majesty."

"You almost persuade me. You almost persuade me, Mr. Carter."

"Think of this for a moment, sir. By performing this act of justice, you will make your sweet daughter, the Princess Deehra, the happiest woman in your kingdom—and, incidentally, you will make yourself the happiest man in it."

"Where is he? Where is this young Hartwell?"

"I don't know, sir. Somewhere in the United States, I suppose."

"Can he be found?"

"Assuredly."

"Find him. Bring him here. Let me see him. Let me talk with him. Let me question him. Let me discover for myself if he has the timber in him to make a husband for Deehra."

"You may be sure he has, sir, else she would not have selected him."

"Can you find him, do you think, by using the cables? I do not want you to leave me now until this thing is settled. Do you think it could be done?"

"I haven't a doubt of it."

"And in the meantime, can you bring Deehra back to me?"

"I do not know where she is, sir, any more than you do."

"But you can find her. You can always find anybody you search for."

"Just now, sir, she is led by one whose sagacity is as great as my own, I believe."

"Who is that?"

"I refer to the Countess Zita."

"Oh! Zita! Find her. Find them both and bring them back to the palace."

"I am afraid it is much easier said than done, sir. In a note that Zita wrote to me she told me that she did not believe that even I could find her, and I give her the credit of knowing whereof she spoke. She assured me that one year from now she would receive a letter from me if I sent it to your embassy in London. That is all I know about it."

"But they could not get out of the kingdom."

"I am afraid, sir, that they could if they attempted it. I think Zita could do almost anything that she set out to do. However, I will make the effort to find them—but only on your promise, sir."

"My promise of what, Mr. Carter? Don't ask too much of me just yet."

"Your promise that there shall be no more talk of Zollern; and no more talk of marriages not acceptable to the princess. If your majesty will assure me of those two things, I will lose no time and avoid no effort to find the princess and bring her back to you as soon as it can be done."

"I will so promise you, Mr. Carter. You have my word for it."

"Very good, sir. And you still wish me to send at once for the young Count von Hartzwold, your majesty?"

The king laughed outright.

"Yes. I do," he said.

*See No. 590.

CHAPTER V.

THE CAPTAIN'S WORD OF HONOR.

The detective found the prince anxiously awaiting his return from the royal audience, which had lasted such a considerable time that the anterooms were filled when Nick passed through them on his way out.

"The child is born, and it's a boy," said Nick, laughing, as soon as they were alone. "We are going to christen it Count von Hartzwold."

"What in the world are you talking about?" asked the prince, with a puzzled expression on his face, but, nevertheless, greatly relieved to find the detective in such apparently good humor with himself and all the world besides.

"I'll tell you something that will interest you," replied Nick. "I don't suppose you would regard it as probable that Countess Zita could have reminded me of something that I had clean forgotten before I knew her; would you?"

"In your present state of mind, Nicholas, I would regard anything at all as quite probable. Please tell me what you are talking about."

"Well, I have already told you that I am quite well acquainted with Richard Hartwell?"

"Yes."

"Once upon a time, a long time ago, while in a confidential mood, the major—he was then a lieutenant—told me something about the history of his family. It was that that I had forgotten until the countess reminded me of it this morning."

"Oh! You are not very lucid, but I will be patient. I don't suppose you have happened to see the countess this morning, have you?"

"No; but she sent me a second note that you knew nothing about; and in that note was a suggestion that reminded me of Hartwell's family history."

"May I ask what all that has to do with the present dilemma?"

"Yes. Hartwell's great-grandfather was Count Ludwig von Hartzwold, who——"

"Really?"

"Yes, really. I suppose you know the rest, Rupert?"

"Yes, or at least I think I do. Ludwig's elder brother was chancellor of the kingdom under my great-grandfather. There was a misunderstanding in the family, and Ludwig went to America just before your revolutionary war, I believe. He was a widower with one son, whom he took with him, and that son was killed in your war while with Washington. After that Ludwig married an American woman for a second wife, and he never returned to this country, nor, so far as I know, did any of his descendants."

"Good! Richard Hartwell is Ludwig's descendant through the medium of the American wife—and there you are. I knew it all the time, but I had forgotten it until Zita, in her note, reminded me of it. I don't want to claim any credit for what has happened. Zita should have all of it."

"But what has happened?"

"This: I suggested to his majesty that the easiest way out of all the difficulty would be to restore the title and estates of the Hartzwolds to Richard, and then to bestow the hand of Princess Deehra upon the young count."

"Great Heaven! And has he consented to do that?"

"Practically, yes. There are some conditions attached to his consent, but they will be easily met. The thing is as good as done."

"I am amazed! Amazed!"

"I fancy there will be others who will be amazed, too, before very long; eh?"

"You must have had a very friendly interview with the king, Nicholas."

"I did. We were just a little bit slow about getting together; but once we got there, it was all right clear through. If the king wasn't a king, he'd be a rattling good fellow—almost as good a fellow as you are, Rupert. He gave me his promise that if I would bring Deehra back again, he would never mention Zollern or an undesired marriage to her again."

"So you are going to do it, eh?"

"I'm going to try to do it. You seem to think that all I've got to do is to go out on the palace steps and whistle. You forget that Zita is piloting that campaign."

"Oh, but we must find them, somehow."

"Correct; but where are we to look for them? You tell."

"I confess that I haven't an idea."

"No more have I. We might put an ad in the paper, saying: 'Zita. Return. All is forgiven,' or something like that, but the chances are that neither of them would ever see the paper."

"Of course you are joking about using a newspaper."

"Of course I am, prince. Now look here, you know a lot more about Zita than I do. Where do you suppose she would be likely to take the princess?"

"I haven't any more idea than the man in the moon. She might take her to Mars for all I know."

"I don't suppose she has any estates, like Lunmark, for example, lying loose around here anywhere, has she?"

"No. She is the last of her race, and she has no fortune. That is why she applied for the position in the palace as lady in waiting to the princess."

"And she hasn't any uncles or aunts or relatives who would take her in and provide a place of hiding for the princess, has she?"

"No; and, besides, you must remember one thing."

"What, for instance?"

"There isn't a person in the realm who would dare to hide the princess lest offense be taken by the king."

"Could they get across the border? Could they get out of the country?"

"On general principles I should reply that they could not; but all things seem to be possible to the young countess. You have already said as much yourself."

"I know it. I am only trying to think, and I am thinking aloud. How about the princess? Is there anybody around who would take her in?"

"The same answer that I gave in regard to Zita would apply to her. There are hundreds who would be only too glad to have the princess go to them, but not one who would lose any time in getting to the palace to tell the king."

"Well, we have got to find them, somehow, and as soon as possible. I want to give the princess the good news. But just now I must go out and send some cable-messages across the Atlantic."

"You know, of course, that it can be done from the palace just as well?"

"Yes; but I wish to attend to this matter myself, and I don't want the folks around the palace talking about it. In a word, Rupert, I am going to send them through the United States Ambassador. They can go in cipher, then, and that is what I wish."

"Ah! I see."

"Rupert, at the king's request, I am sending to America for young Hartwell. He is wanted here at once. The king wishes to see if he has the making of a count in him."

"Has it gone so far as that?"

"Yes. Now, while I am gone, I hope you are not above doing a little detective work; eh?"

"I don't think I know how."

"It's easy; dead easy. All you've got to do is to walk around the corridors to Zita's apartments and find out for me all there is to be found out about Zita's departure. I suppose it is 'way beneath your dignity to do such a thing; eh?"

"I will see what I can do while you are gone. How long a time will you be away?"

"Oh, a couple of hours. On my way out I will have a chat with Captain Hensau. I think I will enlist his services."

They parted then, and Nick hurried from the palace, discovering that Hensau was not about anywhere and that he would have to wait till his return to see him.

At the American legation he found no difficulty in enlisting the aid of the ambassador in the search for Hartwell, and the messages were finally sent in cipher, through the State Department, to be communicated to the War Department, and finally, if necessary, to the secret service, in order to locate the young officer so lately in the army.

The ambassador was naturally rather curious to know what could be wanted of the young man at the court to which he was accredited, and finally Nick replied to his questions frankly by saying:

"General, if you will put aside your official robes, metaphorically, of course, and will ask me just as a plain man to tell you all about it, I'll do it; but always on the condition that, officially, you forget it instantly."

"I can do that, Mr. Carter. I confess that I am curious."

Thereupon the detective related the entire story to him from beginning to end, knowing that he was telling it to a man upon whose discretion he could thoroughly rely, and to one who would spare no effort to assist him, moreover.

Returning to the palace, he encountered young Captain Hensau on the steps outside the building, and he called him to one side, noticing as he did so that the captain of the palace guards was distinctly uneasy about it.

"This young man knows more than he wishes to tell," was his mental comment. Aloud he said:

"I see, captain, that you anticipate my question; at least in part. You are already familiar with the fact that the princess, accompanied by Countess Zita and by Zita's maid, have left the palace?"

"There would be no use in my denial to you, sir."

"Precisely. Now, I want you to tell me all that you know about it."

"That, Mr. Carter, I cannot do."

"No? Why not?"

"Because I have given my word of honor to her royal highness herself, and I will not break it, not even at the command of the king."

"Good boy, Hensau! I always liked you. Suppose, however, that I should assure you that the king himself has given me *his* word of honor that the princess may return here freely and have no fear of Castle Zollern staring her in the face, and no dread of future propositions of hateful marriages—what then?"

"It would make no difference, sir. My word has been passed. Besides, I know nothing about Castle Zollern, or anything connected with it."

"So the princess did not inform you *why* she was running away this time?"

"No, sir."

"But you guessed? No?"

"I surmised."

"Precisely. That is a better word. I won't ask you

how they got out of the palace, for I suspect that you helped them out of it, and I don't blame you in the least. I would have done it myself had they asked me to do so. But what time did they leave?"

"I must decline to answer, Mr. Carter."

"Did they tell you not to tell me?"

"I promised to tell nobody anything at all about it."

"I suppose they took Annette with them, did they not?"

"I suppose they did."

"Well, captain, here is a question which you can answer without breaking your vow, and without in any way jeopardizing your word to the princess."

"Well, sir?"

"If I should give you a written message to the princess, or to the countess, would you undertake to forward it for me?"

"I could not, sir, for I am just as ignorant of their destination as you are."

CHAPTER VI.

A CLUE WHERE LEAST EXPECTED.

The day was bitingly cold, and yet the air was invigorating; suddenly the detective turned upon Hensau again, and with an abrupt change of the subject said to him:

"I wonder if you would do me a favor, captain? I wonder if you would procure me a good saddle-horse so that I can take a ride? I—— What is the matter?"

"Nothing at all, sir."

"Oh, all right. Can you get me a horse; and have it here in fifteen minutes?"

"Certainly, sir."

"The exercise will stir my blood up a bit, I think."

Nick watched the captain of the guards as he walked away to attend to the duty that had been given him, and there was a smile of understanding on the face of the detective as he did so.

"So I hit the nail on the head that time, without in the least intending to do so, did I?" he asked himself. "He might as well have told me in so many words that the princess and countess, and whoever else was with them, went away from here on saddle-horses. The young captain thought, or, rather, feared that I had guessed it when I asked for one. Saddle-horses, eh? Now, I wonder where they could have been going? Saddle-horses would certainly suggest some place in the country. I wonder—I wonder if Zita could induce the princess to go back again to Castle Linmark?

"No: that isn't to be thought of. In the first place, the count of Linmark is not yet out of danger from his wound, and—*no*. It isn't there. Where, then? And I wonder, moreover, where the horses were procured?"

He had just asked himself that question when Prince Rupert came outside the palace and approached him.

"Captain Hensau, whom I just met inside, tells me that you are going for a ride, Nicholas," he said. "Shall I accompany you?"

"I would be delighted if you would; certainly."

"I have told him to fetch my two favorite horses. Where were you going?"

"To tell you the truth, I wasn't going anywhere in particular. I only wished to stir my blood up a bit, to feed my brain so that I could think. Rupert, if the princess and the countess happened to leave the city last night on horseback, which way would they have gone?"

"Bless you, I haven't an idea!"

"Where could they have gone?"

"Why, they might have gone almost anywhere, don't you think?"

"I mean, where is there another place like Castle Linmark? If Herbert were not lying at the point of death, wounded by my sword, as he is,* I should really think they had gone there, but that, of course, is not to be considered. Now, where is there another such place?"

"Bless me! I don't know."

"There must be others like it somewhere in the kingdom."

The prince smiled whimsically; then he replied:

"There are two that occur to me just at the moment."

"Well?"

"One of them is no less a place than the Hartzwold castle. But the place is utterly deserted. There is no one there save a few caretakers, and the living-rooms have not been used for years. It would not be fit to live in."

"Still, it is worth investigating. It would be like Zita to select some such a place as that, according to my mind."

"I hardly think she would go there, however. In fact,

*See No. 590.

I don't know how they could do it. The castle is under the care of the crown. No one could enter there without special permission of the chancellor. No, Nick, it is impossible that they could have gone there."

"What is the other place to which you had reference?"

"Zollern itself."

"Oh, pshaw!"

"That is what I thought."

"Where is Zollern, anyhow? How far is it from here?"

"Nearly a hundred miles, I should say, as the road winds; probably less than half that as the crow would fly."

"Humph! Here come the horses. Prince, I am going to use your authority as a marshal of the kingdom——"

"My dear Nicholas, have you forgotten that the king made you a marshal of the kingdom in your own right, and that, according to the commission he gave you, your authority exceeds my own?"*

"That was only for the time being, prince."

"On the contrary, it is good during your stay here, and whenever you return, also, until the commission is revoked. You are literally my superior officer, for your appointment is special. Mine is merely honorary. But what is it you wish to do?"

"You shall see in a moment."

Captain Hensau approached them at that moment, followed by an orderly leading the two horses; and, as he saluted, Nick called to him.

"Captain Hensau," he said, "how many men have you under your direct command now?"

"One hundred and forty, sir."

"How many are on duty at the present moment?"

"Fifty-two, sir."

"The remainder are on reserve?"

"And resting, sir. Six are in the hospital, or on hospital orders."

"Are there any absentees out of the hundred and forty?"

Again for the briefest instant Nick fancied that he saw that hunted look appear in the eyes of the young captain, who was the soul of honor, and who, considering his promise to the princess, was really placed in a very uncomfortable position.

"There is one, sir."

"Who is he?"

"Sergeant Herman Mehr, sir."

"Where is he that he is absent?"

"He secured leave to visit his relatives, sir. He said something about one of them being ill."

"Ah! When did he secure that leave, captain?"

"Yesterday, sir."

"At what time yesterday?"

"It was in the evening, sir."

"At what hour of the evening?"

"It was nine o'clock, sir, when the leave was marked on the roster."

"And when is he expected to return?"

"Leave was granted for five days, sir."

"Thank you. That will do. I was on the point of asking you to call your guard out for review in the armory court, but I find now that it will be unnecessary. I will ask you, however, to issue an order to the effect that the moment Sergeant Mehr reports back, he shall come at once to me, and without exchanging a word with anybody else until after he has seen me. I will request you also to observe the latter part of that order, captain."

The face of the young captain was now pale, indeed, but he saluted without another word, and withdrew.

No sooner had he gone than the prince, whose curiosity had been whetted, asked:

"What in the world was all that about, Nick?"

"This, prince. I discovered a little while ago that Hensau assisted the princess and the countess when they left the palace last night. He virtually confessed as much to me, and——"

"He shall be made——"

"One moment, Rupert. You just now reminded me that I am for the moment, on military grounds, at least, your superior officer. I wish particularly that Hensau be not troubled any more than is necessary about this matter. He gave his word of honor to the princess, and he must not be asked to break it."

"Oh. I see. Certainly not."

"I discovered when I asked for a saddle-horse—at least, I thought I discovered that the young women left the city on horseback. That is why I have been questioning you about where they could have gone."

"I see."

"While you and I were talking about it, it occurred to

*See NICK CARTER WEEKLY, No. 590.

me that they could not have gone very far in any direction without a guide, or, at least, without a male escort. Following that idea out logically, I told myself that if young Hensau assisted the ladies out of the palace, and also managed somehow to provide horses for them, he also supplied them with an escort, or guide."

"Good; that is so."

"Quite naturally he would select one of his own men, in whom he could implicitly trust. He has entire authority over them. Nobody ever questions him about them at all. If one of them wishes to be absent, it is only the permission of the captain that has to be secured."

"Quite right, Quite right."

"In the emergency that arose last night, where would he turn if not to one of his own men, eh? Do you recall the fact that the interview between the king and the princess terminated about half-past eight?"

"Yes."

"Sergeant Mehr's leave was granted about nine. Do you see how it all dovetails together?"

"I do."

"When the princess left the presence of the king she must have gone at once to Zita and told her that she was threatened with Zollern. Together they decided at once to leave the palace, and they sent for Hensau and placed their trust in him. He could not, and would not if he could, refuse his aid to Princess Deehra. Moreover, he is in love with Zita. There you have the nucleus of the whole thing."

"I think you are right."

"So Sergeant Mehr was detailed in the service of her royal highness, Princess Deehra. He was told to take them to whatever destination Zita may have selected, and he was given five days in which to take them there and return. That is about the size of it all."

"I think it is."

"Well, at least we are not without some clue to work upon, small as it is. But I very strongly suspect that Sergeant Herman Mehr will be quite as obstinate a witness as his captain. I doubt very much if he can be prevailed upon to tell anything."

"He can be compelled."

"No. He must not be compelled to tell if he has promised not to. And, besides, Rupert, I don't think it will be at all necessary. If with the information we now have I am not able to trace the princess and find her, it is high time that I adopted another profession."

"I think you have proved your ability at the profession by what you have already discovered."

"Thank you. I will wait here until I have heard from those cables I sent away to-day, and then I will go on a hunt after the princess and the countess. It is now pretty certain that they are in the country, unless, indeed, this horseback ride was only the first stage of the journey they really intended to take. We must not forget that Countess Zita is generaling that campaign."

CHAPTER VII.

A CLUE INSIDE THE PALACE.

The detective spent the better part of the remainder of that day in an effort to discover where Hensau had procured the horses that the princess, the countess, and the maid who accompanied them rode out of the city.

But in this he was unsuccessful. It was evident that Captain Hensau, although compelled to think quickly, had also thought wisely, and that he had left no trace by which the fugitives could be followed from the city itself.

Toward evening Nick Carter strolled through the palace to the quarters of the guard, and found Hensau in his administration office, where he was seated, frowning at nothing, and evidently much perturbed by the events of the last twenty-four hours.

Nick was really sorry for him, for he knew the young captain to be as loyal as any man could be, and he realized that, as an officer of the palace guard, he was now placed in rather an unfortunate position, particularly if the prince, or Nick Carter in his capacity of marshal of the kingdom, should elect to press the matter of the escape of the two ladies.

He started guiltily when he saw who his visitor was, and drew himself up stiffly in a salute.

"Hensau," said Nick, in a kindly tone, "I have come to tell you that I don't want you to give yourself any uneasiness over what has taken place. In your place I should have done exactly as you did. If you had done less than you did, to assist those two ladies, one of whom is your princess to whom you owe every allegiance—if you had done less than you did, I wouldn't have a bit of use for you."

An expression of intense relief crossed the countenance of the young captain, and he exclaimed impulsively:

"Thank you, sir. Thank you. I will confess that I have been greatly troubled. I felt that I could depend upon you, sir; but his royal highness ——"

"Hensau, the prince is just as good a fellow as I am; as you are; they don't make them any better than he is. You need not trouble yourself about him."

"Ah, sir, you don't know what a relief this is. I was on the point of writing out my resignation, and having it ready."

"Tut, tut, my lad. You shouldn't even think of such a thing."

"But I have done something else, since you questioned me to-day, sir."

"Ah, indeed? What have you done?"

The ghost of a smile flitted across Hensau's face as he hesitated for a reply; but then he said:

"When you asked me about Sergeant Mehr to-day you frightened me, although I am sure that the sergeant would not give any information he has promised not to. Yet his refusal to reply to questions that you or the prince might ask him would make serious trouble for him, and he is a faithful man for whom I would not like to make trouble."

"I can well understand that."

Again that strange smile flitted across the face of the captain, and then he said slowly:

"I have extended the leave of Sergeant Mehr to thirty days, instead of five, sir; and I have sent a messenger to intercept him on his return, to inform him of the fact. I have the authority to extend his leave, you know, sir, and——"

He got no farther, for the detective got out of his chair, and gave the young officer a resounding slap upon the shoulder.

"Good!" he exclaimed. "Hensau, you're a brick! I mean from your own standpoint in this affair. You have simply put it out of my power to question the sergeant for thirty days."

"Yes, sir."

"I'll shake you by the hand, captain, as being wiser than your years would warrant. Of course, you cannot know that it is distinctly to the interests of the princess to return here now as soon as may be; you could not know that. You are acting simply from the standpoint given you by the two ladies, which was that they must not be overtaken under any circumstances."

"Yes, sir."

"From that view of the case you have done nobly, and I shall commend you to her royal highness when I see her. I shall also commend you to the prince; possibly even to the king himself, when this is all over."

"Thank you, sir."

"You did well, too, in securing the horses that were used. I will admit to you that I have tried all the afternoon to discover where you got them, and I have not succeeded."

Captain Hensau was not accustomed to dealing with men who read countenances as Nick Carter could do it, or he would have taken pains at that moment to keep his own face expressionless.

But he did not do that. Instead, he smiled as if well pleased with what he had done, and he stroked complacently the downy mustache he wore in a congratulatory manner that amused the detective, while it also told him a lot.

Almost immediately thereafter he rose and left the room, returning at once to his own apartment, where he rang and directed that the chief equerry of the palace stables be sent to him at once.

The young man who filled that position was of good family, and he entered the room easily and pleasantly, rather pleased to have been called by a man who had already won such a name as Nick Carter had done in and around the palace.

"I have sent for you," said the detective, "to ask you if it is too late for you to take me the rounds of the stables to-night."

"Not at all, sir. I was just about to make my evening rounds when your message came to me."

"How often do you make the rounds?"

"Usually twice a day, morning and evening. Sometimes only once a day, and then in the evening. Unless there is a hunting-party on hand, or there is a special for riding abroad among the people in the palace, I really have very little to do. It is only when the horses are in constant use that I keep close watch of them."

"I see. Did you make the rounds this morning?"

"No, sir. I did not consider it necessary; and, besides, I was sent away on an errand for her royal highness, the Princess Deehra. I did not return till noon."

"Ah. You were sent away—when?"

"Last evening—about ten it was."

"*Mmm!* Did Captain Hensau, perhaps, convey the wishes of her royal highness to you?"

"He did, sir."

"Thank you. Now, if you will take me through the stables, I shall be greatly obliged. How many horses are under your direct charge?"

"There should be ninety just at present, sir. There are fifty animals retained in the stables all the time for the use of their majesties; his royal highness, the prince, has thirty, and Princess Deehra's stable at present counts ten. I have not counted five horses of my own. They do not properly belong to the royal stables, although I keep them there."

"I see."

We need not describe in detail that visit to the royal stables, although it might well be worth the space of several pages; and Nick found that his conductor thoroughly knew his business, and enjoyed it. He loved horses with all his heart, and he knew every one of them by name, and his questions to the grooms and stablemen showed that he kept himself thoroughly familiar with the condition of every animal under his care.

He described at length the merits and the shortcomings of the king's horses; of those belonging to the prince, and told of various wonderful things that many of them had done; and then they arrived at the department where the horses belonging to the princess were kept.

Instantly when he ran his eye along the line of box stalls his manner changed, and he called sharply to one of the men to come to him; and then the following conversation took place, while Nick Carter stood near, smiling all the time.

"Where are Monarch, and Royal, and Blitzen?" he demanded. "Who has dared to take them from the stable without my order?"

"They were taken away last night, sir, by direct order of her royal highness, the princess."

"Indeed! Who brought the order?"

"Sergeant Mehr, of the guards, sir."

"At what time?"

"At ten-thirty, sir. The order was endorsed by Captain Hensau, sir, and it was imperative. You were not here this morning, sir, or a report would have been made to you about it."

"What grooms went with them?"

"None at all, sir. Sergeant Mehr brought two of the guards with him, and they led the horses away. The order directed that Monarch, Royal, and Blitzen be delivered to Sergeant Mehr, and it bore the royal seal. If you care to see it, sir——"

"No, no. It is unnecessary. That will do. You may go. I will ask Captain Hensau about it."

He turned then to the detective, and added:

"I am sorry, sir, that those three horses are not here for you to inspect. They are really the finest animals we have in the stables, save possibly two of the private horses of his majesty. It is an unprecedented thing that they should have been taken out at that time of night, and by three troopers. I will ask Hensau about it at once."

Nick looked at him and smiled again. Then he said:

"Would you do me a favor, my young friend?"

"Certainly, sir, if I can."

"Then say nothing whatever about the absence of the horses to anybody. It was to discover if they were absent from the stables that I asked you to bring me here. I am taking you partly into my confidence. I hope you will respect it."

"Most certainly. And, after all, since there was an order under royal seal, it is really none of my business; only I keep rather close watch of my favorites."

"Naturally."

Nick sought the prince when he returned to the palace, musing to himself as he made his way toward the small library:

"It was a clever piece of work all through. It is evident that Monarch, Royal, and Blitzen were procured for the uses of the princess, the countess, and the maid Annette. Mehr doubtless rode his own horse, and, even if I could find the two troopers he brought with him to the stables to help him take the horses away, they would know nothing at all about where they were going.

"But the princess lost no time in getting away from the palace after her interview with her father. That terminated at half-past eight, or near that time, and at half-past ten, or very soon after it, the princess was in the saddle.

"The young man who just showed me through the stables was sent away purposely so the animals could be taken out in his absence, and he was detained so that he would not discover that they were gone until this evening, twenty hours afterward. It was clever; too clever for even Hensau to have figured out. I think I see the fine hand of Countess Zita in all this."

"Ah, Nicholas!" exclaimed the prince, as the detective entered his presence, "there are half a dozen messengers

searching the palace for you. Your ambassador has sent over a request that you call upon him immediately, if possible. I suspect he has heard from those messages you sent out this morning."

"I suppose he has, prince. I will go at once and see about it."

"And will you return here, please? I want to know about it."

"Yes."

"I will wait for you."

CHAPTER VIII.

NICK CARTER'S DARING PLAN.

"Mr. Carter," said the ambassador, as soon as Nick was with him, "the young man for whom we have been searching across the ocean is at this moment in Paris. He has been there for the last six months. Our ambassador to France has been in communication with him—in fact, they have had an interview—and Major Hartwell says positively that he cannot come to Breslin."

"Why not?"

"He states that he is under some promise not to cross the borders of this country until the expiration of a certain interval which has not yet half-lapsed. He declines to break that promise."

"Confound him!" muttered the detective. "He won't break it, either. Nothing in the world could induce him to do it. I know what the promise is, general, and unless he is released by the person to whom he made it——"

"You are forgetting that you took me into your confidence about this affair, Carter—unofficially."

"That's so. I had forgotten it."

"The promise was made to the princess, of course."

"Certainly."

"If she understood the circumstances, she would readily release him from the promise, don't you think?"

"Certainly she would. But she doesn't understand the circumstances, and I haven't the least idea where she is in order to tell her. I wish I could be in two places at once, but I cannot."

"You are not the first man who has made that wish. Where would you like to be, if you could be in two places at the present moment."

"I would like to remain here, and I would like to be in Paris, too."

"Do you mean that if you could be in Paris you would argue with the major in the effort to induce him to come here?"

"No; I know him too well to attempt that. He has given his word, and he would not come, unless released from his promise by the princess herself."

"Then what good would it do you if you were in Paris?"

"I'll tell you what! I'd kidnap young Hartwell and bring him here, willy-nilly."

"Couldn't you have it done for you, Carter?"

"Eh?"

"Couldn't you have the kidnaping done for you? You are on familiar terms with the chief of the Paris secret police. There is a man who can accomplish wonders. If you could make him understand the situation thoroughly—er—don't you think he would do it for you?"

"Yes; I do; if I *could* make him thoroughly understand the situation. But how am I going to do that? It is a delicate matter to kidnap a young chap like Hartwell in France, and take him across the country and out of it into another country. Even the Paris chief would have to be pretty well assured that he was doing the right thing—and that Hartwell would forgive him after it was done."

"The chief has every confidence in you, personally, hasn't he?"

"Yes; oh, yes. That part of it would be all right. But——"

"Then let me make a suggestion."

"All right. What is it?"

"Sit down there at my desk and write out a full explanation of the circumstances of this case for the chief in Paris. Tell him all that you will have to tell him in order to prevail upon him to help you out. Make it just as long as you like, but take my advice and make it perfectly clear, so that he will thoroughly understand the situation. Leave nothing unsaid; and when you have done that, I will have it put into cipher and will telegraph it to the Paris embassy. There it will be retranslated into good French, and a special messenger shall deliver it to the chief within two hours after you have written it. I happen to have a personal acquaintance with the chief myself—I was secretary of legation in Paris once, you know—and I will add a message of my own to yours, which he will also receive. I think, if you are explicit enough, he can be induced to do what you want. It will be a great thing for this embassy, Carter, if Hart-

well should be made Count von Hartzwold, and should marry Princess Dechra. Things here would be made a whole lot easier for me. I would be on Easy Street so far as my diplomacy is concerned in the future. I want to see it accomplished."

"It will be a long telegram, general."

"I don't care if it is ten thousand words. Write it."

"Isn't it rather irregular for you, as an ambassador, to undertake this?"

"Sure; but we have to do irregular things all the time."

"Will the ambassador to France help you out, do you think?"

"Oh, yes. I'll answer for that. We understand each other."

"Then I'll do it."

"There is one thing you must not forget, Carter."

"What is that?"

"You must arrange with Prince Rupert, or with the chancellor, or with the king himself, to have the Frenchmen met at the border, to relieve them of the charge of their captive. They couldn't get into the country without that, and, besides, there would be a whole lot of unpleasant questions asked."

"Oh, I can fix that part of it, all right."

"Write your message, then."

It took almost an hour to write it, for Nick had to be very particular in what he said, so that the chief of the Paris secret service would understand thoroughly what he was about; but it was written at last, and given into the hands of one of the confidential clerks to be put into cipher—and then the detective leaned back in his chair and laughed long and heartily.

"Hartwell will be the maddest man on two continents—until he finds out what it is all about," said the detective. "I don't know just how the chief will do it, but he *will* do it when he understands the situation. I'll induce the king to give Captain Hensau a commission as special messenger for the king, and I'll send him to the border to meet Hartwell and bring him here—if Hartwell doesn't get loose and murder somebody before he arrives."

"He is likely to do it if he can, Carter."

"Don't I know that? It's a queer situation, isn't it, eh? Kidnaping a man and bringing him as a prisoner into this country, to make a count of him, to bestow an immense fortune upon him, but more than all to marry him to a royal princess—the woman he loves."

"He'll forgive you fast enough when he knows the secret of it."

"To be sure he will; but imagine what his thoughts will be until he does know the secret. I shouldn't wonder if he insisted upon seeing you the moment he arrives, general."

"I only hope he will. I think you had best make arrangements to have a locomotive and a special meet him at the border; don't you?"

"Sure. The only difficulty I see in the way of perfect success is the fact that I may not be here in the city when he arrives. I must start out at once on my search for the princess. However, we won't burn any bridges till we get to them."

"Can you count upon the king to carry out his part of the program, Nick?"

"Yes. He has n't yet said so, in so many words, but I know that he has decided. If I did not know it—if I were not positive about it, I wouldn't have anything to do with the matter. Look here, general. You'll get a reply from the chief some time to-night. When you do, I want you to send word to me at the palace at once, will you?"

"Yes."

"No matter what the hour may be."

"All right."

"Then I will say good night. I still have an appointment with the prince. By Jove, general, but this has been a busy ten hours. Good day."

It did not take long for the detective to describe in detail all that he had decided to do when he returned to Prince Rupert.

The prince was rather startled at first; then he laughed long and heartily, for he saw the ludicrous side of it, too.

"Nicholas," he said, still smiling, "I never knew a man like you. I never knew another who dared to take such high-handed proceedings to accomplish an end. But this is rich! Rich!"

"It is, rather."

"Hartwell—or shall we call him Count von Hartzwold?"

"We might as well. It amounts to that now."

"He will be angry first, then frightened; not for himself, but for the princess. He will suppose that in some manner all his plans and hers have been found out, and that she will be made to suffer. Then he will be brought

here, and then—then he will be taken out of his shackles and plunged head first into happiness."

"With a big H. Sure. I wonder if the king has retired, Rupert?"

"No. He is playing billiards with the English military attaché."

"I want an appointment for Hensau as special messenger to go to the border to meet Hartwell; I want an order for a special engine and carriage to bring them here—and it must all be done without the knowledge of the chancellor. Furthermore, I don't wish to tell the king how I have arranged this affair."

"Fortunately, Nicholas, I can arrange all that for you without applying to the king at all. I frequently have use of Hensau, and I can make it appear that this is a commission undertaken solely for me."

"Good. Then send for Hensau at once, eh? I'll have to take that young man fully into my confidence—but he is worthy of it."

When the young captain appeared a little later he looked worried again, but the pleasant smiles with which Nick and the prince greeted him at once put him at his ease.

"Sit over there, captain," said the detective, "and listen to a story that I have got to tell you. You must understand, also, that, in telling it, I am disclosing a state secret, and that you have been selected to carry out a part of the necessary ramifications, because you can be entirely trusted. Now, are you all attention?"

"Yes, sir."

And then Nick Carter told the young captain of the entire circumstance; told him of all that had happened that day, and what the future held in store for Hartwell and for the princess; and he ended by relating the plot that had been hatched in order to get Hartwell into the country; and he ended by saying:

"When the message comes, acquainting me with the hour for the arrival of Hartwell at the border, you are to take a special train, departing ostensibly on business for his royal highness. In addition to the authority which the prince will give you, I will provide you with a letter to the men who will deliver Hartwell into your hands. After that it is up to you to bring him here to the palace, and to do it without permitting him to have a word with anybody. Do you think you can accomplish it?"

"Yes, sir."

"I suppose you have a comfortable room, from which he cannot escape, where you can lock him fast until he is made to understand the situation, haven't you?"

"I have. A room as comfortable as this one."

"Very good. That is where you must detain him until further orders from me. *From me*, mind, for I can't have others interfering in this affair."

CHAPTER IX.

AT THE MOATED CASTLE OF ZOLLERN.

A message arrived from Paris before morning to the effect that the chief would undertake to accomplish what had been asked of him, but it warned the detective that the hour could not be fixed. An opportunity would have to be sought, and at the moment of sending the message the chief had not had time to think upon the matter.

At the best, he thought it would be two or three days before Nick Carter could expect his wishes to be fulfilled, and in the meantime he must wait in patience for the message that would arrive later, telling at what time to expect the "prisoner" at the frontier.

"During those two or three days," the detective announced to the prince, "I may be able to accomplish a lot in the way of finding the princess, and I do not think the time should be lost. It is my desire to have the princess here when Hartwell is brought along, if that is at all possible. If not, then I want her here as soon after his arrival as possible."

"And the unfortunate part of it is that you haven't the least idea where to search for her," said the prince.

"Oh, I am not so sure about that. I have been thinking a lot about it lately, and I fancy I have a fairly good idea about where to look for them."

"You do?"

"Yes. I have been considering the countess. I have been weighing her in the balance, and asking myself just what she would have advised under the circumstances."

"Do you mean that you have found an answer?"

"I think I have; or, at least, one that suffices until I prove its fallacy."

"May I ask——"

"I am going first to the Hartzwold castle, and from there, if I find no trace of the two ladies, I shall go to Zollern."

"To Zollern!"

"Yes. Notwithstanding the horror of the place that the princess feels, it would be just the one that the countess would select in which to hide until the first search is past."

"But the princess ran away particularly to avoid being sent to that very place."

"All the more reason why Zita should select it as the most unlikely place for any search to be made for them."

"Possibly."

"And, besides, there is a whole lot of difference between being a prisoner in a place and being there of your own free will."

"That is true."

"So I think that, after all, I shall find them at Zollern. However, in order to cover the ground thoroughly, I shall go to Hartzwold first."

"Do you desire my company on this expedition, Nick?"

"Very much, indeed, and I regret that I cannot have it."

"Why can't you have it? I should be delighted to go with you."

"I am assured of that also; but you will agree with me that it is quite necessary that one of us should be here in the palace in case Hartwell should arrive sooner than we now expect. If he is brought here before my return, it will be necessary for you to stand between the king and the facts. In other words, the king must not know the facts until we are prepared to reveal them. He must not know them until I have smoothed Hartwell's feathers."

"I understand. You are right."

"I wish to help myself out of your stables. I shall go by horse."

"Take whatever there is that you want. Who will go with you?"

"I shall go alone, I think."

"And have you any idea how long you will be away?"

"No more than you have. If all goes smoothly, I hope to be back here in three days; but I may not be."

"And if you are detained longer than that, what shall I do about Hartwell?"

"Just give him plenty to eat and drink, see to it that he does not get a message to the king, or outside the palace, and for the rest let him wait."

"It will be rather hard on him, won't it?"

"He will be all the happier when it is over."

"When shall you start?"

"At break of day; and I shall ride hard."

"Don't you think it would be well if you took a guide?"

"No. I don't need one. I have been studying the maps, and I know perfectly well how to go. I think I can manage the affair better alone."

"Let me suggest one thing."

"What is that?"

"Carry with you in your pocket that parchment commission that the king gave you, and also do not fail to wear the emblem of the Order of the Golden Eagle. You may need them both before your return."*

"Thanks for the suggestion. I will do both."

"At Hartzwold you will certainly need them, for, as I have already told you, the castle is in charge of the crown, and there is a caretaker there who will not be disposed to admit you without an order directly from the chancellor."

"And at Zollern? What am I likely to find there?"

"Zollern is used now only as a hunting-lodge in the mountains and forests. The king rarely goes there. To my certain knowledge, he has not visited the castle for three years. But the order on your breast and the commission in your pocket should act like magic upon whoever is in charge."

True to his word, the detective left the palace at daybreak, riding one of the prince's horses and leading another one; and by nightfall he rode into the court before the castle of Hartzwold.

The readiness with which he was admitted by the caretaker, however, convinced him at once that those he sought were not there, and so he made only a cursory examination of the interior, pretending that his mission was merely one of curiosity.

And the castle was well worth all the curiosity that might have been devoted to it.

It was a massive pile of masonry, standing almost at the pinnacle of a mountain, and commanding a view for many miles in every direction. And the estate was a lordly one for young Hartwell to become possessed of.

"Fortune is knocking at that young man's door, and he doesn't know it," mused the detective as he retired to rest, leaving strict injunctions that he was to be forwarded on his way at daybreak.

His route this day lay almost at right angles to that

*See NICK CARTER WEEKLY, No. 590.

of the preceding one, and it was much easier traveling, since there were fewer steep hills; also the distance to his destination was much shorter.

It was only shortly after noon when he issued from a wood, and saw frowning down upon him from a stupendous height, almost directly above him, the gray walls of the old castle.

A winding road led up to it from where he stood, and the route from the edge of the wood was bleak and bare, so that his approach could easily be discovered by any one who was there, and who might be watching out for him or for others.

He was not aware of it, of course, but at that very instant a pair of binoculars was fixed upon him from a window of one of the towers, and behind those binoculars were the shrewd but beautiful eyes of Countess Zita.

She turned to the princess, who was standing behind her.

"I did not much believe that we could fool Mr. Carter, Dechra," she said, smiling, "but I am surprised that he should come in search of us after what we both wrote in our letters. Anyhow, he won't get inside until we know what his business is."

Already orders had been given to the attendants in the castle that no one should be admitted without special permission of her royal highness; but, nevertheless, Zita hastened away and sought the lower part of the building the moment she saw Nick Carter begin the laborious ascent toward it.

"A man is approaching, Swartz," she said to the old ex-sergeant of artillery, who was in charge of the place. "You have not forgotten the orders given you by her highness?"

"No, countess. I have not."

"You will obey them to the letter?"

"At any cost, countess."

"Then do not respond when the gentleman demands admittance. Make no response to him at all, at first. Let him call and shout for an hour or so, but if he is too insistent and will not go away, step out upon the balcony above the drawbridge, and talk with him from there."

"And what am I to say, countess?"

"What are you to say? You are to lie like a gentleman. Can you do that?"

"I can try," he replied, with a grin. "You mean, I suppose, that if he asks if her highness and you are here, I am to say that you are not."

"Precisely."

"Suppose he knows differently? Suppose he has met that sergeant on the road, and that the man has betrayed you?"

"It makes no difference. Deny that we are here."

"Suppose he should bring with him the authority of his majesty himself, and suppose he exhibits it and demands of me that I lower the bridge and raise the portcullis in the name of the king? What shall I do, then?"

"Tell him that you have a superior officer here to whom you will refer the matter—and then call me."

"Are you my superior officer, madam? I have never served under a woman."

"Well, you are serving under one now."

"I cannot defy the authority of his majesty, the king, countess."

"You can appear to consider it long enough to call me. Or you won't have to call me, for I shall be here directly behind you all the time. If I see that the water is getting too deep for you, I'll swim in and pull you out."

The old man shook his head, greatly perplexed; and then he crossed to a loop-hole in the old walls and took a survey of the approaching intruder.

After a moment of careful scrutiny, he started back with an exclamation of alarm.

"Countess," he exclaimed, "do you not see it?"

"Do I not see it? See what?"

"The order he wears on his breast."

"Well, what of it?"

"It is the order of the Golden Eagle. I dare not refuse to recognize it. It is as if the king himself were there demanding admittance."

"Bah! Parley with him as I told you to do. Here is her royal highness now, who will direct you to carry out every order I have given you. Is it not so, Dechra?"

"Certainly, Swartz. Are you hesitating to obey my commands?"

"No, your royal highness; no. But——"

"If you do not respond to his calls, he will not know that you hear him," said Zita, with her accustomed shrewdness. "We will see that you do not get into trouble about this affair, Swartz. You must obey."

"I will do my best, countess."

At that moment Nick Carter pulled up his sweating horses at the opposite side of the moat, and called out lustily.

"Ho, there! Warder of the castle! Ho-o-o-o!"

CHAPTER X.

NICK CARTER STORMS A CASTLE.

He waited a long time for a reply, but, as there was none, he called again, this time repeating the summons several times before he desisted.

And still there was no response, although he continued to call at intervals upward of half an hour.

At last, becoming impatient, he drew a revolver from his pocket and fired it several times into the air; and after that he called out again, this time changing his form of expression.

"Ho, warder, ho!" he called. "I bear a special commission from his majesty, the king! Open in the name of the king, or take the consequences. Open, I say, or it shall go hard with you!"

Poor old Swartz was trembling like a leaf by this time, and now he fell upon his knees before the princess.

"Oh, your royal highness!" he cried out. "It is not that I do not wish to obey your highness, for I do. It is not that I have physical fear for myself, for I have not. But, your highness, all my life I have served the king, and the king's father before him, and I have never yet refused to obey. I pray, your highness, permit me to open."

"A moment, Swartz," exclaimed Zita, for she saw that the old man was indeed suffering, and she stepped past him, threw open the door that gave upon the balcony above the drawbridge, and in another instant stepped out upon it in full view of Nick Carter.

"Why, Zita!" he called out to her, laughing, "you must have been taking your afternoon nap. I assure you I have been calling here almost an hour."

"I know it," she replied simply.

"And will you not admit me, countess?"

"No."

"Not even when I demand admittance in the name and by the authority of his majesty, the king?"

"Not even then, Mr. Carter," she replied haughtily; and Nick chuckled, whereat Zita flushed angrily.

"Do you deny the authority of his majesty?" he asked, with mock solemnity.

"For the moment I do—until I know your business here."

"It is to have word with her royal highness, Princess Deehra, oh, countess," he replied.

"She declines to receive you."

"So? Even in the name of the king?"

"Even so. She has fled from the authority of his majesty."

"So I have been told. So two letters that I received informed me; but I come as a special messenger from his majesty to make terms with her highness."

"It is evident, Mr. Carter, that you paid very little attention, and gave less respect, to the wishes of her highness, as expressed in those letters to which you have referred."

"Do you judge me so poorly, countess?"

"I judge you by what I see and what I hear."

"Indeed."

"Your presence here and your words are of little comfort to us, Mr. Carter."

"And yet I have come to you to bring comfort. Will you not direct that the bridge be lowered and that I be admitted?"

"No."

Nick was hugely enjoying this scene, and he purposely prolonged it. And now, with elaborate deliberation, he drew the roll of parchment from his pocket, opened it, and began to read his commission aloud.

But he had not proceeded far ere the countess stopped him.

"You need not trouble yourself to read it, Mr. Carter. I know all about it."

The detective rolled it together again, replaced it in his pocket, and then, believing that he had worried the countess sufficiently, he was about to tell her the truth of the reason for his visit there, when Princess Deehra suddenly appeared on the balcony beside her.

Nick had had no idea that the princess was so near at hand, or he would have used more haste and teased less in his words to the countess. Now he removed his hat quickly, and bowed low over the pommel of his saddle—and he waited for her to speak.

"Why are you here, Mr. Carter?" demanded the princess coldly.

"I am here, your highness, to convey a message to you from your father, the king."

"What is that message?"

"I would prefer, if your highness will permit, to deliver it within the walls of the castle rather than to call it aloud from where I stand."

"I prefer to receive it here, Mr. Carter."

"As you will. But before I deliver it I have a word

to say for myself. I received the message that you sent to me through the letter to Prince Rupert, and also the messages sent to me personally by Countess Zita. I wish your highness to know that I decided on the spot to return to my own country, and to have nothing further to do with searching for your highness, in order that you might be coerced into a marriage that did not please you. I respected your wishes regarding the matter, considering them as commands; and even if you had not made the request you did, I should have done as the countess asked me to do; and had neither of you asked me to refrain from this search, I should, on my own part, have declined to seek you. I told the prince as much when he read your letter to me, princess. I informed the king of that same determination when he sent for me. With this preface I will proceed."

But the countess was already clapping her hands; and, turning to the princess, she cried:

"Did I not tell you?" and the princess leaned forward over the edge of the balcony for a moment, after which, with a strange smile, she said:

"Will you forgive me, Mr. Carter, for doubting you?"

"Who could blame you, princess, for doubting, under the circumstances? I least of all."

"Will you come inside to deliver your message?"

"Yes; if I may."

"If you *may!*" exclaimed Zita. "If you knew how utterly lonely we are—— Lower the draw, Swartz. Raise the portcullis; and see that some one cares for those horses."

Ten minutes later the detective was seated in the great hall of the castle, where a fire of logs was blazing brightly; and opposite him was the princess, while rather nearer at hand the countess lingered, expectantly.

"The message, princess, can hardly be said to be direct; but his majesty the king has given me his word of honor that if you return at once to the palace, the word marriage shall never again be mentioned to you without your approval, and that you need not go to Zollern, or to any other place of retirement."

"Mr. Carter, is that absolutely true?"

"It is absolutely true, princess."

"And there is, you are sure, no mental reservation in the promise on the part of his majesty, my father?"

"I am sure. I will stake my honor upon it."

"Will you tell me what brought about this sudden and absolute change in his majesty's feelings?"

"I think, princess, it was a little plain talk, as man to man, delivered by a certain American whom you know. I think, also, that a suggestion I made, to which I do not now wish to refer, may have had something to do with it. But I can assure your highness——"

"You need not be so formal. You may use the personal pronoun."

"Then I repeat that I can assure you that the king is perfectly sincere in what he has said. He has, in effect, agreed to forget that you are a royal princess, in remembering that you are his daughter."

"Thank Heaven for that! Oh, thank Heaven!"

She rose impulsively and crossed to Nick, extending her hand as she did so.

"You have been a friend, indeed, Mr. Carter," she said. "How shall I ever thank you?"

"You can thank me best, princess, by smiling brightly and looking happy, for I prophesy that a full measure of happiness is in store for you. I have found that the king doesn't do things by halves when he does them at all."

"No; indeed he does not."

"And now, one more thing."

"Yes? What is it?"

"I presume you have sent your horses back again by the man who conducted you hither."

"No. We have retained them. It was our intention soon to cross the frontier. We were, in fact, determined to go to America, Mr. Carter."

"Let me venture to hope that you will yet visit my country some day, princess."

"What was it you were about to suggest to us?"

"This: It is imperative that I should be back again in Breslin with the least possible delay. I have ascertained that, by taking a ride of thirty miles from here to the southward, we can intercept a train that reaches Breslin about two o'clock in the afternoon of to-morrow. In order to catch that train, we should leave here by three in the morning. Do you believe that you and the countess could bring yourselves to attempt that early start?"

"Certainly."

"That warder of yours can find a way to return the horses to the palace, can he not?"

"Oh, yes. He will see that they are returned. We will take two of his men with us to take charge of them when we abandon them at the station at Wilmarth—for that is the place to which you would go, is it not?"

"Yes."

"Tell me, Mr. Carter," said Zita, "was there great excitement in the palace when it was discovered that we had gone?"

"There was no excitement at all, for the reason that your department was kept a secret."

"And Captain Hensau—did he get into any trouble on our account?"

"None whatever. I discovered very quickly that he had aided you in your flight, but we were not worse friends on that account, although I troubled him a little, I fancy, at first."

"Just as you tried to trouble me when you were sitting out there on your horse, making me believe that you had come here to take us back to the palace by force, if necessary."

"Yes; something like that."

"You ought to be ashamed of yourself."

"I am, intensely, countess."

"How did you guess that we were here at Zollern?"

"I guessed it by reason of my superior knowledge of a certain lady named Countess Zita."

"I would like to know what you mean by that, sir."

"I figured it out that, because of all that had occurred, this would be the very place you would select in which to hide for a time; you would select it as being the least likely to be suspected as your place of hiding. Besides, there are only two places to which you could have gone, in this manner, that are within reach of Breslin—this and Hartzwold."

"We thought of Hartzwold."

"But considered it impracticable, eh? So it was."

"And you came directly here?"

"Almost. I went to Hartzwold first, to make sure that you were not there. I came from there this morning."

It was at this point in the conversation that the princess rose and, excusing herself, left the room, thus giving the detective an opportunity he had wished for; that he might see the countess alone, for he had much to say to her."

CHAPTER XI.

THE DETECTIVE RECEIVES A REWARD.

It was evident that Zita had longed for this opportunity as well as the detective, for no sooner were they alone than she drew her chair nearer to him and exclaimed:

"Now tell me what it's all about! I know that you have got something up your sleeve. What a wonderful man you are, Nick Carter. I declare I could almost fall in love with you if——"

"If it weren't for the fact that you are in love with some one else; eh, countess? There was a time when I thought it was Count Herbert, but now I guess it is a certain young captain who is, I believe, in every way worthy."

"Never mind my affairs. I want you to tell me all about it."

"All about what?"

"What you said to the king; and what he said to you; and how you finally fell on each other's necks, and all that."

"It was your suggestion that saved the day, countess."

"My suggestion? What do you mean?"

"About Major Hartwell. Surely you remember it."

"Do you mean—— Oh, do you mean that because of his connection with an old family of this country, the king will—will—— Oh, what will he do? Tell me."

"Can you keep a secret, Zita?"

"Try me. Of course I can."

"A state secret?"

"Even that."

"Do you know what family it is that Hartwell is connected with in this country?"

"The Hartzwolds, I think. A great family in its time, but now extinct."

"It is to be revived, Zita."

"Revived?"

"Yes. You must not tell the princess."

"No."

"Major Hartwell turns out to be a direct descendant of Count Ludwig von Hartzwold, who was a brother to the great chancellor, and in consideration of that fact the king has determined to make Hartwell into a count. He is to become Count Richard von Hartzwold, and is to have all the Hartzwold estates restored to him, after which—— Shall I go on?"

"Yes, oh, yes." She was leaping toward him with her lips apart, her eyes burning and her bosom rising and falling rapidly under the excitement of this news.

"Do you think you can bear it?"

"Please don't tease. Tell me—Nicholas."

"If I thought I might have something nice for my reward!" He stopped, and Zita laughed aloud.

"I declare you are as bad as I am!" she exclaimed. "Very well, you shall have your reward. If your news is half as good as you have led me to believe it is, I will kiss you—so there!"

"After that, countess, who would hesitate? Here goes, then. The king has practically promised me that he will bestow the hand of Princess Deehra upon the new Count von Hartzwold."

Nick did not expect what happened then, in spite of all that had been said about it, but before he knew what was doing, the countess seized him around the neck and kissed him three times, smack! smack! smack! and then darted away from him, blushing furiously and laughing hysterically.

"I did it!" she cried out.

"You certainly did. It was like a Colt automatic—and you missed the target every time. You never came anywhere near making a bull's-eye."

"I hope you didn't think that I intended to kiss you on the lips!"

"No; nor on the end of the nose, either, but one of them sure enough landed there."

"Oh, isn't it splendid news? We must call the princess——"

"One moment, if you please. That is precisely what you must not do. I'll take you still further into my confidence, if you will promise me not to say a word to her till I give you leave."

"I suppose I must."

"Yes, you must."

"Well, I promise. Now, what more is there?"

"I have sent for Hartwell."

"He won't come. He is under promise to Deehra not to enter the kingdom."

"All the same I have sent for him. I know he won't come willingly, but I'm going to have him *brought*. When the mountain wouldn't go to Mohammed, he never thought of digging it up and fetching it, did he?"

"What in the world do you mean?"

"When the king gave his tacit consent to the project that came about through your suggestion, I cabled to America to find out what had become of Hartwell. I finally located him in Paris, but he put his foot down flat, so to speak, and refused to stir a peg. So with the aid of a very good friend of mine—two very good friends, in fact—I put up a little job on the maj—on the count. I am going to have him kidnaped and brought into the country, even against his will, and he will be delivered to me, this side up with care, at the palace of the king, in Breslin. He ought to be there by the time we arrive, to-morrow afternoon. My only fear is that he will get there first."

Zita stared at the detective in wide-eyed amazement.

"How did you dare do it?" she breathed at last.

"It was the only way. The king wouldn't make him a count until he had seen him; and the prospective count wouldn't stir a peg without the express permission of Deehra. I didn't know where Deehra was any more than the man in the moon, and something had to be done, for the king might change his mind if he has too much time to think about it, and particularly if Deehra were safely back in the palace before he saw Hartwell."

"I am beginning now to understand you—Nicholas."

"That name will be easier for you if you shorten it to Nick. Well, now there is another thing."

"Another? What is it?"

"I want the king to have his interview with Hartwell before he is aware that Deehra is back again—and I have got to prepare Hartwell for that interview."

"He'll be angry at first, won't he?"

"Angry! He'll be the maddest man on earth—until he knows all about it. I'd about as soon enter a cage of lions as tackle him at first. But it must be done."

"And you want Deehra and me to enter the palace quietly——"

"No, I don't. I am going to take you both to the American embassy and leave you there with the general for a time. I shall wire from Wilmarth for the embassy carriage to meet us at the station. I suppose you can scrape up a couple of veils to wear, can't you?"

"Oh, yes. I'll engage that we won't be recognized. We came away prepared to conceal our identities, if necessary. Don't you think it would have been a better plan to have taken Major Hartwell to the embassy also?"

"And have had him demand its protection? Not much, my child. Really, for a smart young woman, you do make bad breaks at times. If he were taken there, he would be out of the country again before you could say Jack Robinson."

"Oh, I wish we could start at once. I am so afraid that something will happen to upset your plans."

"You need not be. They are too well laid for that."

"I don't suppose they will keep the major in chains until we come, will they?"

"Hardly. He will be made as comfortable as if he were a guest at the palace; only he will not be permitted to speak with a soul."

"He won't know what has happened to him. He will think it has something to do with Deehra, and he will be crazy with anxiety."

"Naturally."

"Poor fellow!"

"Yes; he is playing in hard luck, isn't he?"

The princess returned at that moment, and she addressed the detective directly she entered.

"I have been looking over the maps," she said, "and I fear that it will be a hard ride if we do not start from here till three in the morning. We will have a moon the latter part of the night, and it would be my judgment that we start out soon after midnight."

"It would be mine also if you think you can bear the fatigue, princess," replied Nick.

"Oh, the fatigue will be nothing. I am so anxious to get back. If my father has really forgiven me, I shall be so happy. If I am never more to hear of those hateful marriages, I can with much better heart give up the one which now seems so impossible. It was never possible, was it, Mr. Carter? It was only a foolish dream."

"It could never have been possible, in the manner you had planned it, princess. But you have gained so much now, in this promise of the king's, why not take heart, and hope that everything will come out right in the end?"

"A royal princess may not wed with a man of no title. That was why I sought to lose my royalty."

"But men of no title sometimes achieve them."

The princess sighed deeply.

"You little know what it means to be burdened with rank," she murmured. "How I hate it all! I envy every girl I see working in the fields; every woman I see upon the streets."

"And, princess, they look upon you with wondering envy, too. It is one of the strange things of creation that we are never quite satisfied with what we have, but always desire the unattainable."

"I suppose so," she admitted, with a sigh.

"Princess, do you happen to know where Major Hartwell is at the present time?"

"No, Mr. Carter, I haven't the faintest idea. I suppose he is somewhere in his own country."

"Do you really suppose he could remain so far away from you as that?"

"Why not? What difference do mere miles make when the separation is for—for always?"

"It was originally for three years, was it not?"

"Yes."

"And a year and a half of that time has passed?"

"Yes."

"Perhaps he might be found in Paris, princess."

"Why? Why do you suggest that?"

"I will tell you. I am going to make an effort to see him at once—as soon as it may be possible to do so. I want you to give me a ring from your hand that he will recognize, and I wish also to have you write a line on a sheet of paper, in which you will say merely that he is to trust me implicitly. Will you do that, princess?"

"But why? Why? What good will it do?"

"Have I failed you thus far, princess? Won't you trust me yet a little farther?"

"Yes, yes. Indeed I will."

"Then write the note and give it to me, with a ring from your hand; one that bears your initials; one that he will remember. Will you do it?"

"Yes. Shall I do it now?"

"At once, if you please. At once, princess."

CHAPTER XII.

THE KING IS A GOOD FELLOW.

It was half-past three o'clock in the afternoon of the following day when Nick Carter strode in at the door of the palace in Breslin, having left the princess and the countess safely in charge of the general at the embassy, where they were to wait patiently until they received a message from him.

Almost the first person he encountered was Captain Hensau, who came forward quickly.

"I am glad that you have come, sir," he said rapidly, and in a low tone—"and I hope that I will never have such another commission to fill. It was terrible; the last part of it, when Major Hartwell woke up to find himself here in the palace. He is mad with rage."

"No doubt. You may take me directly to him, and then leave us alone together until I summon you. The king knows nothing?"

"Nobody, save the prince, knows anything at all about it, sir."

"That is right. Now take me to him."

For a moment after Nick Carter entered the room where Hartwell was confined, the latter stared at him in amazement; but then he drew himself up haughtily, and ground out between his teeth:

"I suppose this is your doing, Carter."

"Part of it is," replied Nick calmly. "The rest of it is the king's."

"The king's! Are you serving the king?"

"No; I am serving Princess Deehra. Here, Hartwell, I won't keep you on the rack any longer. Read that message which the princess sends to you, and look at this ring which she assured me you would recognize."

He seized the note and the ring eagerly, and devoured them with his eyes. Then for an instant he stared at the detective, and then, taking a step nearer, he cried out, half in a frenzy:

"Carter, by Heaven, if you don't relieve this strain upon me I shall go mad. What does it all mean? Why was I drugged at the headquarters of police in Paris, where I was requested to call, and then brought here in my sleep? What does it all mean?"

"You were drugged and kidnaped and brought here, by my order, because you refused to come here of your own will, at my request. Now, if you will sit down over there and listen calmly, and without interruption, I will tell you the whole story, from beginning to end. After that, if you have any objections to offer to what I have done, I'll—I'll eat my hat."

"Go on, then, for Heaven's sake!"

And Nick did go on.

He told the whole story just as we already know it, and all the time Hartwell sat there staring at him as if he thought the detective had entirely taken leave of his senses. Twice he opened his mouth to interrupt, but each time he was silenced by a gesture from Nick; and so the story was finally brought to a close, with Hartwell still staring.

But suddenly he bounded to his feet with a glad cry.

"Deehra! Deehra!" he exclaimed. "You are to be mine, mine, mine! Oh, Heaven be praised that this should come true! Carter, I don't care a rap about the title and the estates, but Deehra—— Ah!"

"You must care about the title and the estates as well, Dick, for you cannot have Deehra without accepting them first. I hope you understand that."

"Yes. Yes."

"Now come with me to my rooms and make use of my wardrobe. My things will fit you like a glove. I reckoned on that before I sent for you. While you are slicking up a bit, I will get word to his majesty—and I promise you that you shall see Deehra in less than an hour."

When the detective left his friend, he hastened to the prince, to whom he told all that had occurred, and together they went to the king, although Nick paused on the way there long enough to give certain directions to Captain Hensau about bringing the princess and the countess from the embassy.

"Your majesty," said Nick, as soon as they were received, which was at once, "I have to report that Count Richard von Hartzwold is in the palace awaiting your majesty's pleasure and commands."

The king frowned; then he laughed aloud.

"You certainly are a master hand at taking things for granted, Mr. Carter," he said. "But here"—he rested one hand upon a parchment that was on the desk before him—"is the patent of nobility which asserts the truth of what you say. Let the count be summoned. . . . And now what of my daughter, Mr. Carter?"

"Her royal highness has not yet arrived at the palace, your majesty, but I believe she will be here within a half-hour, or less."

"She is well?"

"Perfectly so, and overjoyed that your majesty forgives her."

"You have told her nothing about this arrangement of ours?"

"Not a word, sir; not one."

"I wish you would become a subject of mine also. I will make a prince of you, if you will consent."

"It would spoil me, sir. I am better as I am—and if you have another occasion, can serve you even better as I am; just plain Nick Carter."

The door was thrown open then, and Hartwell entered and bowed before the king. He was pale and handsome, but thoroughly composed.

"Sir," said the king, addressing him at once, and with-

out delay, "you are the great grandson of Count Ludwig von Hartzwold, who was brother to our great chancellor, under my own grandfather. As such, you are the only living representative of that great family, in direct descent. As Count Richard von Hartzwold, if you are prepared to swear allegiance to your king and country, I will restore you to your rights of title and estate. What have you to say, sir. What is your answer?"

For a moment there was dead silence in the room, the king and the new count facing each other, and the prince and Nick looking on at the solemn scene. Then the new count stepped forward quickly and dropped upon one knee.

"I am all unworthy of this great kindness, sire," he said, "but I will strive with all my soul to serve your majesty loyally and faithfully."

"Rise, Count von Hartzwold. The oath shall be given to you later, in due form. For the present this is sufficient. Gentlemen, I present to you Count Richard von Hartzwold, from this moment attached to my personal staff."

The prince stepped forward quickly and congratulated the new count, and then Nick did the same; and just as they were in the midst of it, the doors were thrown open again, and Captain Hensau stepped inside, announcing as he did so:

Her royal highness Princess Deehra; Countess Zita von Strellwitz."

The princess ran into the room, not noticing who was present, and threw himself into her father's arms, crying out as she did so:

"Oh, I am so glad! So glad that your majesty has forgiven me. Oh, my father, it is good to be back again, and to be assured of your love."

The king came very near to having tears in his eyes at that moment. It is certain that he gave no heed to who was present, but folded his arms about his daughter and held her there against him for a full minute.

Then he released her gently and held her away from him, still with her back toward the others who were present; and, looking into her eyes, he said:

"Deehra, my daughter, I promised Mr. Carter that the subject of a hateful marriage should never again be mentioned to you; but is there not, somewhere in the world, some one—a man—whom you have learned to love? Some one because of whom the suggestion of these marriages has been so hateful? Tell me."

"Alas, yes, my father. But must I speak of it now?"

"There is only the prince and Mr. Carter, and one other whom we need not mind, who can hear us, and you have their sympathy. I have determined this day to make you happy, my child, if it is possible. Who is this man whom you love?"

"He is Richard Hartwell, your maj—father; an American;" and again she buried her face, this time covered with blushes, in her father's arms.

The king, looking over her shoulder, saw the new count, with parted lips, forgetful of all who were present save Deehra herself, leaning forward with his soul in his eyes, and with a faint gesture he motioned to him to drew nearer.

"My daughter," he said then, in the same kindly tone, "there is one here to whom you have not been presented. He is Count von Hartzwold. Turn about, Deehra, and salute the count."

She turned wonderingly, and then for a moment she looked wildly from her father to Richard, and then back to the king again; and then, with one cry of joy, such as Nick had never heard before, she threw herself into Richard von Hartzwold's arms, sobbing.

"Come," said the king; and he led the way from the room while the prince and Nick and the countess and Hensau followed him in silence. In the anteroom where they paused for a moment Zita approached the king, and, blushing wildly, she murmured:

"While your majesty is so kindly disposed toward all the world, will you deign to give your blessing to Captain Hensau and me, also?"

"Captain Hensau? Who is he? Ah, I see you mean *Colonel* Hensau. Yes, Zita, and Heaven bless you, also."

A moment later he said to Nick Carter:

"Mr. Carter, you have done a great service to me and to this country since you have been here, for you have taught its king how to be happy. I wish there was something that I could do for you."

"There is, your majesty."

"What is it? It shall be done."

"Just permit me to shake your hand in the good old American fashion, and to exclaim this once, *God bless you, old chap!*"

THE END.

The next number (592) will be "The Two Lost Chirtendens; or, Nick Carter's Clue by Cable."

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TALKS WITH OUR READERS.

The sensational discovery of the disappearance from Dublin Castle of the precious regalia of the Order of St. Patrick is a most eloquent reminder that even the most jealously-guarded treasures are not always safe from the evil designs of clever, enterprising thieves.

It is some 236 years since the regalia in the Tower of London had a narrow escape from the fate which has apparently overtaken that of the Order of St. Patrick. Having concocted a plot with three kindred spirits, a notorious rascal, known to history as Colonel Thomas Blood, induced the keeper of the Crown jewels to admit him and his confederates to view them.

No sooner was the door of the chamber closed, in accordance with invariable practice, than a cloak was flung over the keeper's head, a gag thrust into his mouth, and an iron hook fixed to his nose. These impediments failing to quiet him, he was knocked down and stabbed, the thieves immediately making off with the crown and globe.

Next moment the keeper, who had been knocked senseless, regained consciousness, and, hearing his shouts, his daughter rushed out, screaming, "Treason! Treason! The crown is stolen!" The thieves were speedily run down and, notwithstanding resistance, were captured with the jewels in their possession.

With an insolence all his own, Blood boasted that it was "a bold bid for a crown," and refused to make any confession except to the King in person. The effeminate curiosity of Charles II. secured not only admission to the Royal presence, but a pardon and a reward, for his daring, in Irish estates, worth $2,500 a year, which were granted to the daring ruffian.

The crown of Holland, which is said to have cost $750,000 about seventy-five years ago, actually underwent the indignity of being stolen by burglars. For nearly a couple of years they had it in their possession; and eventually some of the gems from it were found over here near Brooklyn. The others subsequently came to light in Belgium, and were ultimately restored to their original purpose.

Perhaps the crown of Hungary has undergone more vicissitudes than any other European crown. A long time ago, owing to the extinction of the Royal male line, there were several candidates for the Hungarian throne; and eventually the Diet bestowed the Crown on their own nominee.

Having been persuaded to appear in public in his coronation robes, with the crown on his head, the new sovereign was swooped down upon and carried off by the King of Bohemia, crown and all. Much disappointed, the Hungarians thereupon made Otto of Bavaria their monarch on condition that he made it his business to steal back the missing crown.

To effect this purpose, Otto made his way into Bohemia disguised as a merchant, recovered the precious crown, and started back to his kingdom with it concealed in a cask slung at the rear of a wagon. In the course of the journey, however, it was nearly lost again, for the jolting of the vehicle caused the cask to fall into a deep ditch. It was only fished out with great difficulty, but its adventures were ended for a time with its arrival in Hungary.

The next person to tamper with the crown was the widow of King Albert. Aided by one of her ladies she stitched it up in a cushion and smuggled it across the River Danube into German territory, where she herself sought refuge.

When pressed for ready cash, she raised nearly 3,000 ducats upon the crown, which she pledged to the Emperor Frederick. Countless lives were lost and much blood shed before it could be recovered and restored to Hungary, but once again there it was locked up in a strong fortress and guarded night and day.

For the space of a couple of centuries the crown had a comparatively quiet time, though at the time of the Revolution it had a narrow escape. In order to protect it from the Austrians it was buried by a band of patriots in a forest, where it lay concealed for nearly fifty years.

It was then dug up from its hiding place, much the worse for its extraordinary experiences, and conveyed to the Hungarian capital. Since then the crown of Hungary has not figured so conspicuously in the romance of stolen Royal emblems.

Other crowns have been stolen at different times, among them that of Scotland. When that country was invaded by the English, under Cromwell, the crown, with all the other Royal regalia, was removed for safety to Dunnottar Castle.

Finally the invaders captured Edinburgh, and when they were laying siege to Dunnottar the defender of that place was urged to give up the crown and other property, so that it could be concealed from the English in some remote castle in the Highlands.

This the officer refused to do, and, consequently, a plan for stealing the precious jewels was devised by a daughter of the Earl of Mar, which was successfully carried out by the wife of the minister of Kinneff, a parish four or five miles distant from Dunnottar.

From the English general she obtained permission to visit Dunnottar; and, with the crown concealed in her dress, she

mounted her horse for the return journey, being helped into the saddle by the English general himself! Her maid followed on foot with the sword and sceptre secreted in bundles of lint, which it was pretended were to be spun into thread.

They passed safely through the English lines, and on arriving at Kineff the crown, with the other articles, was buried secretly in the churchyard. He afterward made a careful record of their burial so that in case of his death his relatives or friends should know where to find them. It only remains to be said that they were in due course recovered from their grave and returned to the Scottish capital.

A certain well-known bank in Buenos Ayres has reason to be very grateful to a clerk in its employ.

At 2 o'clock one day a well-dressed, prosperous-looking man came in and, presenting a letter of introduction, opened an account with $9,000. Just before the bank closed the same man rushed in again in a tremendous hurry. He had been cabled for to go to New York. He must catch a boat first thing in the morning and must therefore draw out all his money.

The clerk paid him—in his own notes, all of which were clever forgeries.

"Accident insurance companies are very suspicious of all accidents involving injury to the knee, for it is on his knee that the accident-faker mainly relies."

The speaker, a surgeon, frowned and went on:

"There are men who make a living out of fake accidents. They travel from city to city; they insure in every company that issues accident policies; then, with a fake injury, they proceed to collect dues.

"An accident-faker—for so we call these men—has usually a knee that he can slip out at will. He purposely stumbles over an open trap or some hard, sharp obstacle, puts his knee out deftly, raises a big holler so as to secure a lot of witnesses, and then hobbles home.

"He doesn't notify his insurance companies till the next day. By then his knee is so swollen that an accurate examination of it is impossible. We cannot tell whether it is one of those fake, self-slipping knees or not. So we pay the man his money, and he seeks new pastures.

"There was one man—he is in jail now—who in nine years collected over $11,000 in accident policies with the help of a knee that he could slip out as easily as I slip my hand out of my glove."

Paralysis is often imitated by beggars, and so closely that there is no detecting the imposition. A fellow is directed how to hang his wrist loosely down, dropping the fingers of one hand, and to drag the limbs in such a manner as to imitate a paralytic stroke to the life. He is drilled up to the proper business mark by marching him round the beggars' kitchen for hours at a stretch, and night after night. This is continued until the patient can bear a sudden and unexpected prick with a needle, or even the touch of a red-hot iron, without relapsing into his normal attitude.

Not many years ago one of these mock paralytics, who was accustomed to throw off his seeming infirmity and play the burglar by way of change, was caught in the very act of breaking into a house and committed for trial. Here he got up such a semblance of hopeless paralysis as deceived everybody. When the trial came on he was carried into the court on a stretcher, and laid at full length in the dock. Everybody, including the judge and jury, commiserated the case, and he escaped with one year's imprisonment instead of a long term of penal servitude.

The doctor of the prison to which the convict was next transferred felt sure that the whole thing was a sham, and tried all the ordinary methods of detection, including liberal use of the galvanic-battery, but without effect. At length a great heap of damp straw was collected in the jail-yard, and the scoundrel, still stretched on his pallet, which he never quitted, was placed thereon. The straw was fired on all sides, throwing out a little flame and dense volumes of choking smoke. This did the business, and quickly, too. In less than a minute the paralytic astonished everybody but the doctor by bouncing out of the straw with the agility of a deer.

"The game is up," he exclaimed, with a laugh, when he had done coughing, adding, in a tone of triumph: "Anyhow, I have cheated the law out of six years!"

The torture such people inflict on themselves for weeks and months at a time, and voluntarily, is simply incredible.

The Quartermaster's Story.

BY J. A. HIGGINSON.

The hands had assembled to hear the usual evening yarn, for on board the *Dolphin* a custom prevailed that each shellback should in turn relate some experience or adventure of his own, on penalty of losing a plug of tobacco.

Much interest was evinced to hear the quartermaster's yarn, for about his stories there was always a charm of novelty. His store of hairbreadth escapes was practically inexhaustible, but whether amusing, blood-curdling, or pathetic, they were invariably accompanied by a sphinxlike expression of countenance that no one could fathom. More often than not they proved to be carefully concealed jokes, which we all failed to detect until we had been fairly victimized, and he always made it a point of going on deck as soon as the burst of laughter or derision told that he had scored another victory.

You will understand, therefore, why it was that we all sat silent, and with a look of incredulity on our faces, as he proceeded to unfold his story.

"We were homeward bound," he began, as he cleared his throat, "and some thirty miles sou'west of Scilly. The sea was smooth, with a light breeze from the nor'-nor'east, but the night was so dark that I could scarcely see the leech of the maintops'l, for we were on a-wind, and steering full and by. Four bells had just gone, and my mate, Tom Bradley, came aft to take the wheel.

"'Luff, my lad, luff,' said the chief, conning the compass with the eye of a hawk.

"'Aye, aye, sir,' I said, putting the helm down a few spokes, but as Tom took the wheel, there arose from the fok'sle-head a sharp cry of alarm. It was so unexpected, and the night was so uncommonly dark, that the mate and I stood motionless, listening.

"At first we supposed that a vessel without her lights had suddenly appeared, and had confused the man on the lookout as to how she might be approaching. But another cry, that made us shudder and peer anxiously into the darkness for an explanation, quickly followed the first; and with it there were mingled other cries, and then a shout, clear and distinct, rang out on the dark night air:

"'Look out, *the alligator's adrift!*"

At this point in his story the quartermaster paused, and looked round. A murmur of incredulity followed his statement about the alligator. One old shellback, in a solemn voice, earnestly besought the quartermaster to "draw it mild," while a bolder individual openly hinted that this particular yarn had been "made in Germany."

"It's a s(c)illy one, anyhow," chimed in a third sailor, but the only sign of intelligent comprehension which the quartermaster deigned to give was a peculiar tightening of his jaws, and a resolute hardening of his sphinxlike countenance, as he calmly continued the story.

"We happened to be carrying two of those brutes," he said, "from the Chagres River, in the Isthmus of Panama, to one of the zoological gardens, but at that moment I earnestly desired that the combined zoos of the civilized world were down the throat of that escaped alligator, wild animals included. There had all along been a conflict of opinion among the crew as to whether those creatures were properly secured in the tank provided for them; but it was clear that the slimy brutes had decided the matter, and that one, if not both of them, was now perambulating the deck in search of a toothsome young sailor, or a fully developed shellback.

"I am not easily scared, but I have, and ever shall have, a horror of alligators. Had I known beforehand that such company was to appear, nothing would have induced me to join that ship.

"When I heard that cry, I felt, perhaps, more real alarm than if the vessel had suddenly broken out in flames. I confess that ever since their arrival on board I had thought of nothing else by day, and frequently dreamed of them by night, until I was as nervous as a kitten, and would at any time have jumped overboard to avoid them.

"You can imagine, therefore, with what feelings I obeyed the mate's order to accompany him forward. We had armed ourselves with a couple of capstan-bars, and it required no special machinery to keep our eyes thoroughly wide open.

"Upon reaching the deck-house, the mate stationed himself at one corner, while I peered anxiously through the darkness from the opposite side. For a moment I had almost made up my mind to face the brute, and, with the assistance of the mate, either kill or drive him back to the tank; but when the slimy creature suddenly hove in sight, its great jaws opening and shutting in a truly ominous manner, and the long black body slowly crawling to where I stood, I confess that the sight overcame me, and, dropping the bar, I flung to the chief a warning cry, and then rushed to the main rigging, where the whole of the watch on deck had already assembled. From this safe and elevated position I could more calmly follow the exciting incidents beneath.

"The cries of the affrighted shellbacks, who sought to warn the mate, evidently aroused the alligator to increased exertions, and he soon appeared upon the spot which I had so recently occupied.

"The brave mate raised his hand-spike, but whether the darkness rendered it impossible to rightly judge the distance between himself and the terrible enemy, or that the alligator had eluded the intended blow, certain it is that the bar struck the deck and rolled aimlessly from the hands of our chief.

"For a moment he stood undecided.

"It appeared as if he contemplated a sudden recovery of the weapon, but the advancing alligator soon made the attempt impossible, and the chief then turned and fled toward the stern. We saw him hurry to the cabin door, and swiftly secure it, and then he mounted the mizzen rigging amid shouts of approval from the crew.

"The ferocious alligator was now left in complete possession of the ship. I want you to think over, and digest, if possible, the meaning conveyed in that single sentence. Just imagine a fine vessel of nearly eight hundred tons burden left in the charge of an evil-smelling alligator that knew absolutely nothing of navigation, let alone the handling of such a tidy little craft in a breeze of wind.

"To me the position appeared sufficiently serious, but my companions treated it with a levity most unseemly. They desired an inspection of the 'skipper's' certificate, and jeeringly accused him of sailing under false colors. They implored him to serve out an extra 'tot' of grog, and not allow the steward to water it excessively.

"To all such taunts the ugly 'skipper' paid slight heed, but when the mate presently ordered all hands to descend and strive to turn the beast forward, I am persuaded that the alligator understood the command.

"He opened his great jaws as though hinting at what might follow any hasty action on our part, when a perfect deluge of tobacco quids went flying down his throat, but not one roosting shellback dared stir.

"Again and again the mate hurled upon the crew orders, mingled with a whole vocabulary of decidedly healthy expressions, albeit he took particular care to maintain a strictly private life.

"All this while the 'skipper' advanced steadily toward

the stern, but he could at any moment return whence he had came; and had any one been daring enough to descend, it was more than probable that he would meet with a very pressing reception. All, therefore, remained safe in the rigging; but with my old chum, Tom Bradley, the matter appeared much more serious.

"We had all along hoped that the alligator would return to his tank, but such an idea never entered the head of our present commander, for the binnacle light presently attracted his attention, and he made tracks straight for the man at the wheel.

"The careless, jovial behavior of my companions was now succeeded by a state of excitement, for if Tom Bradley left the wheel the ship would immediately fall off from the wind and wander aimlessly across the sea, perhaps during the entire night, when she would have lost many miles of ground. In breathless suspense all eyes were now turned toward my old chum, but not one word was heard, for each man seemed afraid to hasten the climax by a single warning cry.

"Tom must by that time have seen the ghostlike form of the terrible beast looming through the unusual darkness. Be that as it may, it is a fact that he made no sign, and stood valiantly at his post.

"'Luff, my lad, luff,' cried the chief, still clinging to the mizzen-shrouds, but with one eye cocked upon the maintops'l, while the other squinted at the crawling beast below.

"'Aye, aye, sir,' Bradley sang out, for all the world as though nothing unusual had occurred, or as though the alligator was at that moment wallowing in the mud of the Chagres River.

"Yes, there stood my old chum, as straight as any rush, with the binnacle light falling upon his weather-beaten, honest face, that was still turned toward the tops'l; and he was apparently oblivious of everything but duty, while that awful man-eating beast slowly approached the wheel.

"It was the most splendid act of heroism I ever saw.

"I have heard people on shore," the quartermaster continued, "extol the bravery of a little snoozer they called by an outlandish name—Casa—Casabianca, yes, that's the word—who stood upon the deck of a burning ship; but he couldn't hold a candle to my old chum, Tom Bradley.

"In the first place, Tom's father was not handy to sing out upon, and even if he had been, I am certain that the old gentleman would have used much stronger language toward his son's foolishness; and he would have forced Tom to throw up his trick at the wheel before the alligator took him in for supper. And secondly, my old chum didn't even *think* of hanging out signals of distress, and let every one know what a fix he was in; and he didn't let on that the place was getting too hot, either; or even make the least show of fear.

"No, that little chap wasn't in it beside my old chum. The only fellow that ever came near taking the cake from good old Tom was that brave pilot, Jack Maynard—but even *he* had a chance, as long as the machinery of the burning steamboat kept a-moving; but, don't you see, the longer the alligator's works forced *him* ahead, the smaller became Tom's chance of escape.

"Well, just as the alligator sailed abreast of the capstan, which stood between the skylight and the binnacle, the climax in the exciting incident arose. Like a streak of greased lightning, Tom Bradley skipped from the wheel to the rail, and, catching up a bar from the rack, he raised it aloft, and then brought it down, full swing, on the alligator's quarter-deck.

"The result was simply electrifying. With a howl of the closest imitation to a Pawnee war-whoop, the alligator reared straight on end. His near foreleg, as horsey gentlemen observe, rubbed vigorously the spot upon which the blow had fallen, while his entire skin fell off, and was shed in the lee scuppers.

"'You—you have nearly killed me Tom Bradley,' said the alligator, in a beautiful English accent; and it's dollars to doughnuts that Barnum himself never possessed so remarkable a curio.

"'Well, bust my rags,' cried Tom, aghast, and dropping the bar that was raised for a second blow, 'but this here beats all I ever dreamed or knew. *It's the bo'sun's mate!*'

"And such it proved to be. The boatswain's mate, an inveterate joker, had thought to give all hands a jolly fright, and by means of a long oilskin coat, through the sleeves of which two sticks were thrust to represent the jaws of an alligator, he attained, in the unusual darkness, a certain amount of success. Of course, Tom Bradley never supposed that he was attacking anything more intelligent than one of the alligators, which were, however, too securely fastened to admit of escape.

"But the result in no wise detracted from his splendid bravery. He would, I am certain, have fought a real alligator single-handed, and have still found leisure to keep the ship close to the wind. When the mate discovered the truth he descended from the rigging in a perfect cyclone of the most able-bodied personalities I ever heard expressed, and had it not been for the injury already sustained, I truly believe that he would have waltzed that 'alligator' clean over the side on the toe of his strongest sea-boot.

"The injured man was carried to his bunk, whence he arose a somewhat wiser, if less active, man, and thoroughly convinced that practical joking did *not* always pay.

"My yarn is frayed out, lads. There goes eight bells, and I must relieve the wheel. So-long, all," and the quartermaster, as was his invariable custom, lit his pipe, and disappeared from the fok'sle.

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